



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with John Baldessari,
1992 April 4-5**

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Transcript

Interview

**Interview with John Baldessari
Conducted by Christopher Knight
At the artist's studio in Santa Monica, CA
April 4, 1992**

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with John Baldessari on April 4, 1992. The interview took place in Santa Monica, CA and was conducted by Christopher Knight for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

JOHN BALDESSARI: JOHN BALDESSARI
CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

Tape 1, side A (30-minute tape sides)

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . should have the ringers off the phone.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Okay. Let's see, this is Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with John Baldessari on April 4, 1992, at [Baldessari's] Studio in Santa Monica. The interviewer is Christopher Knight.
[Interruption in taping]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: We'll start at the beginning. . . . [laughter]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Okay.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: . . . in National City, in June of [1931]. June?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: First?

JOHN BALDESSARI: June 17.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: June 17. Tell me about your parents. Your mother I think was Danish?

JOHN BALDESSARI: My mother is Danish, and my father, an Austrian citizen, coming from a . . . The city's name was Albiano, and it's near Trento in northern Italy now. Where he was living was in Austria, and then after World War I, the border shifted. But he was an Austrian citizen, and then he immigrated—when he, as I remember, as my memory serves me, in his twenties. And he landed in Colorado working in coal mines, just hustling one job after another. Ended up in San Diego, where he met my mother. My mother had arrived in the United States as a private nurse traveling with a wealthy American couple. And how they got together—I mean, where they both, you know, two different social levels, I've never been able to figure out, nor my sister, yet somehow they got together.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Your father's name was Antonio?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Antonio.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And your mother?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Hedvig, H-e-d-v-i-g. Her last name was Jensen.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: How did she get from Denmark to San Diego?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, she was working in New York at Bellevue Hospital [chuckling], and somehow—I'm not so clear in this—she met this wealthy couple—I think they had copper mines in Arizona—and went out and became a private nurse for them and traveled with them. And they had a home in La Jolla. Was it La Jolla? No, it's an area in, it's called Sunset Cliffs, I think. It's on the ocean.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, that would be south of La Jolla.

JOHN BALDESSARI: South of La Jolla, yeah. Which was then very fashionable. And the guy is. . . . Oh, I can't remember their names. Anyway, he never had any employment that I could figure out other than he collected artifacts for natural history museums, and I remember he was always going around with a butterfly net collecting butterflies. [laughs] And his wife was very well read and always having books sent from the book store. And this wonderful, wonderful huge mansion; I would visit there with my parents on Sundays. And I guess that was real culture for me, sort of.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I wonder if they—maybe you know—had anything to do with. . . . There's like the Museum of Man in San Diego which is a sort of strange _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, he might have. He went all over the world. I remember he gave me a headhunter's axe I had for a long time. [laughs] He just, you know, he'd travel around—and not paid, you know, by any museums. He was very wealthy, and he just donated his services, you know.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So was it in the twenties that your parents. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And what did your father do?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, he was sort of a self-made man. He arrived in Colorado in the midst of, well, the beginning of the Depression, I suppose, and was a coal miner. And I guess he had a real entrepreneurial streak, from stories he would tell me. He already was making money then by essentially recycling. Which it was interesting, by the way, parenthetically, going to India, I felt right at home where they recycle everything, don't throw anything away, and I'd think, "God, I know this life."

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: And he would pick up cigarettes and dry them out on the stove and reroll them and sell them you know. And I guess he made his first break, he said, by. . . . There was a triangle of land where railroad tracks, that apparently wasn't used or anything, and he asked the railroad company if he could use it. And he was living in the Alps, was well trained in cultivating land—you know, taking rocks out and so on. And [he] cultivated that area and started growing onions. And

parlayed that into where he was actually shipping onions, and had already started making money. And I remember once my sister got him to sit down and go through all of the jobs he's ever been through, and she said she just lost track. But it was always this propelling himself hustling, you know, never really working for somebody. And we had a restaurant, he had grocery stores. And I guess at the point where I was born, what he was doing was pretty interesting at the time, was in the salvage business, and he would contract to tear down buildings, houses. You know, either buy them for very little or just get them for nothing, and then salvage all of the material and build houses with the material and sell off the rest of the stuff in a store he had. And until the idea of tract housing caught on, it was a pretty good scheme. And then parlayed that money into buying real estate and. . . . And I remember as a child, basically what I did was sort of. . . . You know, taking apart faucets and reconditioning them, painting them, and taking nails out of lumber and. . . . And I sometimes think that has a lot of bearing on the art I would do because I was. . . . It would almost be in like some sort of museum, you know, looking at maybe two hundred different kinds of faucets, but all generically the same, but seeing all the variations. And taking them apart, painting the handles or what have you. And always looking at things—like “Why is this faucet better than that faucet?” that sort of thing. And I got a taste of the hands-on thing—you know, taking things apart, putting them together, painting things, and so on. My mother babysat me by. . . . You know, I would get something, ten cents a day, something like that in an allowance.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Here's a pile of faucets?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, right. That's what I would do. Right, yeah. Well, anyway I'm saying, I don't know if I'm [prattling, babbling] on, but. . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: No, this is great, this is great.

JOHN BALDESSARI: You just want me to keep on going? [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, _____ like this. And I'm sitting here thinking, “Gosh, it's deconstruction.” [laughter]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, right. Really.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And you had a sister?

JOHN BALDESSARI: A sister. One sister.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: This is older, younger. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, she's older.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: How much older?

JOHN BALDESSARI: She is four years older, and she is living in Leonia, New Jersey, and she went into speech pathology, and that's what she does, and she had gotten married, but. . . . She has two children. And her husband was an academic, college professor in economics, and then had been in the navy, and I think he came out with like Vice Admiral, something like that, so he. . . . And I guess he'd just been approached to be president of a small college when coming back from vacation in Long Island, and a car ran into them, and he was instantly killed, and one of the sons and my sister were badly injured, but anyway. . . . And so, yeah, she lives there and does speech pathology.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So since both of your parents were immigrants, you didn't know your

grandparents or other. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Not on my father's side. And I never knew why, but I went with my mother to Copenhagen when I was fairly young. I think just prior to school, or I must have been in the first year of school, or something like kindergarten or first year. And maybe it was just an extended vacation, maybe there were some marital problems, I don't know. But apparently I. . . Surely then I met my grandparents, though I don't have any memory of them at all.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Do you have any recollection of going to Copenhagen?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, I have a few memories, yeah, but not many, so I evidently was quite young or I have blotted it out or what have you. I've been back once since. My sister is quite, you know, keeps up correspondence and visits quite a bit, and they were. . . . Apparently the family was into importing/exporting, and sort of upper-middle class. That's why we could never figure out how my mother got together with my father. Because my sister had gone back at one time with my mother and said she was just like a different woman. You know, just like going out to theater and opera every night, and restaurants and then come back to San Diego just like a housewife. And she could never figure that out either, how she could. . . . All she could say, "She must have loved my father very much." [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: That's an explanation. Do you suppose then that she had some sort of, oh, I don't know, cultural interests that. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, I think that's certainly where I got. . . . There's some sort of ping-pong effect. My father was this sort of martinet, at least in my mind, and. . . . I guess that was the way you raised children at the time. You know, children were seen and not heard. Both of them being European, you know, too. And so my mother, I always ran to for sympathy. And, yeah, if there is any culture, she's the one. [laughs] It was there, you know, because we both took music lessons, my sister and I, and she played the piano. I mean, she would go to Europe or anywhere, and she brought back a few copies of paintings. I remember a detail of a Velasquez on the wall and a watercolor she had bought and so on. And she'd always get novels sent from Denmark to her. And I always remember it was really. . . . I mean, a very pleasant memory of taking a letter opener and cutting the pages open. And I think I really got a feel for books at that time. And, speaking about books [laughing], I always remember one of my favorite comments of my father was, like he didn't understand why I paid so much money for books because he could get them for me at ten cents each. [laughter] You know, one book was as good as another one. And so he was the practical wing of the family. But when I say I had this sort of ping-pong effect. . . . You know, money was always an issue, and I don't blame him, I guess, in a way. I mean, getting through the depression was pretty tough. And he didn't want me to go through that, so, I mean, money was. . . . That's what you did in life. You had to eat. And so when I began to be interested in art, I'm sure that really just scared him. And I guess the compromise was that both my parents urged me to go into architecture, because somehow that would serve an interest of art but maybe I could build houses and so on, what have you.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: How early was that interest in art expressed on your part, and their recoil towards architecture? Were you like in high school?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I was always good in art, yeah. But I don't think I really thought seriously about it until I went to college. And I only went to college by chance because my sister had gone to the local, you know, San Diego State University—San Diego State College, it was then. And I got out, and I didn't know what I wanted to do, and so I said, "Well, my sister went to college, I guess I

will too.” And the high school I had gone to had no college counseling at all. I didn’t know one thing. . . I remember this, the one smart kid in class had gotten a scholarship to Yale, because the literature teacher there had gone to Yale and [proposed] and he had gone there. And that was pretty exotic. But everybody else, they either didn’t go or I suspect. . . . In my graduating class I can think of maybe four or five of us, we went to San Diego State College.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So this was a public school, like National City High School or something?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, it was called Sweetwater High School. It served two cities, one south, which is called Chula Vista. Which was sort of a little higher class area than National City, but on the way to the border. Oh, I don’t know if I ever told you this, but it’s kind of fun, that I’ve since found out—that Tom Waits was from there also.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Huh.

JOHN BALDESSARI: And I actually called him up once and said “This is true?” and he said, “Yeah.” And so we had a good chat over the phone. And he apparently had worked in a pizza restaurant. The building in which it was, was owned by my father.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Really.

JOHN BALDESSARI: How I found out about this was that a close friend of my sister’s was living in Chula Vista. Tom Waits was her gardener. [both chuckle] And so I always think we’re the only two that got out of National City, either way. And which I’ve always. . . . Because I’ve always liked his music, you know, and I’ve always responded to it. I thought, “Oh, that’s why!” [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [Yes], it’s a deep subject.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Anyway, so when I went to San Diego State College, I liked my chemistry courses a lot, and so I thought, “Well, I’ll either go into chemistry. . . .” Art seemed, “Well, yeah, I’m interested in that.” So I think what I ended up [with] no chemistry but art classes, and eventually some literature, philosophy, [art] classes and so on. And I got my degree actually not even in art practice, but art education. Because my sister said, “Well, you probably want to find some way to support yourself. Why don’t you maybe try and go into teaching, get a teaching credential.” And so then I switched mid, went into art education, and I got my degree in that and simultaneously got a teaching credential. And so when I got out, started teaching.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So that was the practical influence.

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . end of it, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: To back up just a little bit, before going to San Diego State, what was it like in San Diego during the. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: During it?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: . . . during the Depression and war years? Because that’s when I guess you had been a kid then?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Well, I’ve been going to a therapist so long, I think I’ve repressed a lot of my childhood. I mean, my sister remembers a lot and it’s very interesting. You know, I compare notes with her, and she says, “It’s like it’s two different lives.” She said, “I don’t remember being unhappy.

[laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And you say, "I don't remember being happy."

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . happy. [laughter] Well, money was very scarce and so we. . . It's interesting now; my father would have been very fashionable because of the totally self-sufficient. Recycled everything: the compost heap. I remember having to separate egg shells and stuff like that. And we had chickens and rabbits which we ate and even the the rabbit skins he sold. So everything was utilized. And my image of my mother was. . . And we had every conceivable fruit tree and vegetable, and I remember my mother always in the kitchen canning fruits and vegetables, whatever, cooking. And there was always the obligatory Sunday outing in the car, but that was always geared to some practical end—you know, going to this house my father wanted to see under construction or that house. [laughs] And we always stopped off at this one place that was slightly north called La Mesa, sort of northeast of San Diego near Grossmont. And it was a place where you could. . . It was a natural spring. We went with water bottles. We'd get water-bottle water, right. And having to drink. . . You know, I never got the foods that my friends got. They had white bread and bologna, and I had to get home-baked bread. [said tongue-in cheek]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [laughs] Yuk. [also said tongue-in cheek]

JOHN BALDESSARI: And we were eating things. . . You know, meat was always veal. "What is veal? Why can't we have hamburgers." [laughing] But now it's all, you know, nouvelle cuisine food. You know, veal fillets wrapped in spinach and bacon, right? Or salad frisse with bacon. And, polenta and. . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, I mean, all of these. You know, and creme caramel and but you know, never the foods. . . Now, of course, it's just all. . . Rabbit all the time. I cannot eat rabbit in any restaurant now, and it's become fashionable. I think, "No thank you." I had it every Sunday. Figs, forget it. We had figs all the time. And I can always remember trying to trade my lunches with other kids at school.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So did you feel like an outsider then, in many respects?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And was it partially, or largely, because your parents were immigrants?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So there wasn't much of an immigrant population?

JOHN BALDESSARI: No, not in. . . My father, I mean, he spoke with an accent, and I was always, I guess, slightly ashamed of him because of that. My mother was pretty good at it. The one thing they did do well, though. We had a very large piece of land; it went from one block to another. And they had this idea that, I don't know, that better to have the other kids come there than us to go out to the other kids somehow, and so. . . You know, I was pretty lucky. Like they'd set up a volleyball net and play basketball and ping-pong and stuff like that. And so all the kids around in your neighborhood would always congregate there. And so that was good. And it was, in a way I suppose, that I got kind of a childhood which would be maybe impossible now. Not too far away would be undeveloped lands so even you. . . I remember having a .22 rifle and going out and go

target shooting, taking my dog along, and that sort of thing, and riding bikes, and it was fun, I guess. And let me see, I don't know. . . . College. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Were you conscious at all of the war? I mean San Diego being. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Very much. Oh, yeah, sure, because the constant sight were these what they call barrage balloons. They were these blimp-like things that they had over the cities so any low-flying planes came in, they'd get entangled in these things.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Wow, I didn't know that.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, and they're into all these. . . . There's always like sort of Macy's parade all these balloons in the sky, there was these big silver blimps. And then constantly. . . . What was the name? I can never remember it, but they're building model airplanes at PBY, patrol bombers. They're an amphibious plane, two-motored, and constantly running patrol flights over. I guess they really thought. . . . I remember having to go through. . . . There were civil defense drills, and you had to put in, where you had black out curtains at night, and you had to put down, and. . . . Yeah, and then the. . . . It was a Navy town, and Marine Corps, too. There was Marine Corps bases there. And largely it was the defense industry where ships and airplanes were built. Yeah, in that case, very much aware. But on the other hand, I don't, I just. . . . I didn't really know much other kind of life.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I remember when President Roosevelt. . . . We were sitting outside having lunch in the garden, and my parents turned the radio on. President Roosevelt announced that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. And I didn't know what that meant. I remember my parents were [really, more] serious about it.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What's your earliest recollection of art? Of having an interest?

JOHN BALDESSARI: In art?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah. Either in school or. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, yeah, in school, just that I. . . . I guess. . . . I still have some drawings around here marked "A+," "good imagination," and so on.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, from the very start, I guess I had some proficiency which. . . . And so it was always one of my favorite subjects, and I was always very good at it. But I didn't think about it beyond that, just. . . . That wasn't what you did in life. I mean, it was just something that was fun. And the same way through college. You know, it was just. . . . You know, it was four years that I didn't have to think about doing anything. [laughter] And it's more fun. And then, I guess when I. . . . And then when I got my B.A. degree, I said, "Well, obviously what you do next is go into graduate school." So. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: More fun.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Right. And so I did a year at San Diego State. I really didn't know what I wanted to do. I mean, I stayed in art and education, and then I had the thought I might go into art history. I thought, "Well it's like kind of. . . ." I enjoyed art history. I thought I would go to Berkeley, which I did.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Did you get your B.A. in 1953?

JOHN BALDESSARI: '53, yeah. And then that wasn't what I wanted either, because it was all sort of. . . . I guess what I was really interested in was contemporary art, and wanting to write about art, maybe being an art critic. And it was just all sort of the basic preliminary stuff—you know, memorizing Roman coins and this date and that date and so on. And the only person in contemporary art was Herschel Chip, and he wasn't that good—I mean, in terms of contemporary art. The best art historian that made it seem exciting was James Ackerman. But that wasn't the field I was interested in, in renaissance art, and so I got out of there and went back and just took my master's degree in painting. I got it in 1957.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: When you were at Berkeley studying art history, do you remember what courses you took, once [it was your major]?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, Renaissance art, I think. Modern art, I guess, up through, I suppose, Picasso, Matisse, like that, and Greek art, Roman art. You know, just basic.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Sort of a basic first year.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, basic stuff.

[Tape 1, side B]

JOHN BALDESSARI: I mean, the only good thing about it in retrospect was I began to know how to use the library and how to find stuff, and stuff like that. And much better grounding in art history than I would have gotten otherwise.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Did you spend any time in San Francisco at all?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Not much, pretty much in Berkeley. I know we'd go over there occasionally, not much.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Any connection or interest in the art. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Community there? Not at all. See, my. . . . It wasn't until much later. . . . I mean, real artists, it was an unknown factor to me. A real artist was. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Dead. [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: I didn't know anybody.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I mean I didn't know anybody. You know, they were in books or museums, or like that. I never had. . . . Even at that point, I'd never been into a private gallery, you know, or anything like that.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So the San Francisco Art Institute and things like that were just. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Unknown to me.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Unknown at this time. Okay, so after Berkeley, you went back to San Diego?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I went back just to San Diego and I got the degree.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: At San Diego State?

JOHN BALDESSARI: San Diego State, yeah. Then, as immediate as I got out, one of my instructors had taken ill, and I taught his classes at San Diego State for one term, which gave me my real first taste of teaching. Let's see, then what happened? And then I got a job teaching Saturday life drawing classes at the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery. My friend had recommended me when they were looking for somebody. And then I started teaching in a high school. . . . Art in a lettering class, which I was very good at.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Lettering?

JOHN BALDESSARI: [laughs] Yeah, right. And then what? Then I had signed a contract to teach for the next year, and there was a summer course catalog from UCLA that said that they were going to have a guest artist there, and it was Rico Lebrun. And I'd heard about him, and he was a real artist. [laughter]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What made him a real artist?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I don't know, but everybody had talked about him, and he was really very well known at the time. And so I went for a summer, went up there and took the course.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: At UCLA?

JOHN BALDESSARI: At UCLA, and lived in one of the fraternity dorms—fraternity houses, rather—for the summer. And did that.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What was the class like?

JOHN BALDESSARI: A painting class. You would just paint every day, and then once a week he would give a lecture. Those lectures, Chris, were standing room only.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Really?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And people would come. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: From miles around.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, to hear this guy. But he was very dramatic and eloquent and so on. And so. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: A large class?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, yeah. It took up. . . . I think he had about three studios of people _____ was going on. And I noticed that like people would drop by, and he'd always bring them over to where I was working, and I didn't think too much of it other than it made me nervous. And on the last lecture, he talked to the whole class about this one painting that I had done.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Really?

JOHN BALDESSARI: And later he said, "Have you ever thought about being an artist?" And I said, "No, not really." And he said, "What do you do?" and I said, "I teach," and he said, "Well, you really

ought to think about it.” And I said, “Yeah, what’ll I do? What do I do?” [laughter]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What are _____?

JOHN BALDESSARI: And he said, “Why don’t you go back to being in art school, and maybe you’ll meet people there and so on and continue working.” And so I guess all his coterie of friends, like Bill Bryce and . . . What was the other guy? Howard Warshaw. There was a whole sort of Lebrun school, you know. They were all teaching at Otis, and the guy was then. . . . Yeah, it was Otis. Part of that was called the Jepson Art Institute. And Herb Jepson was still teaching there, and he said, “Let me introduce you to Herb Jepson, and maybe you can go back to school.” Which I did. And I broke my contract and went there for a couple of years. And actually the guy I got sort of. . . . And then I began a little bit going to galleries and so on, and interesting. . . . And the guy I learned sort of about, got a sort of a passion for—or an inkling of New York—was Peter Voulkos, who was teaching there. Ceramics. But he was a big hero in the art community at the time. But he would get these magazines from New York, and I would look at them, and they’ve got. . . . You know, they didn’t seem very exciting, and began to get some taste of something. And then I would. . . . Of course all during that time, I was going to art galleries and so on. Then I dropped out of there after a couple of years and tried. . . . I was living, I think, in Pasadena; I’d moved out there. And I didn’t know what I wanted to do next, and so I went back to San Diego and got a teaching job again. No, actually, the first job I got. . . . When I got back I couldn’t get a teaching job because I was too late, and a friend of mine got me a job as a technical illustrator and I was. . . . Oh, God, that was the worst job I ever had. I mean, the day was so long, and I was just drawing these stupid drawings of Atlas missiles.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Atlas missiles?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. [laughs] And they were just like technical handbooks for engineers, and I said, “Well, I certainly don’t want to do this.” So then. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I just want to make sure we have the dates, chronology.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, God. What date was that?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Fifty. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, yeah, God.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: ‘53, you graduated, and you got your B.A. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: ‘57, I got my. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: ‘57, your M.A. from San Diego State.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And then it was about two years that you were . . . ‘57, ‘59. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: So, yeah, around in there. Yeah, we’re talking about _____.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Okay.

JOHN BALDESSARI: And then I got a teaching job in a junior high school.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: In San Diego?

JOHN BALDESSARI: In San Diego. It was a ghetto school. And that was an experience. [chuckles] But I think, in looking back, I began to. . . . I was slowly getting some. . . . And I was painting, you know, and there were a few artists. . . . Most of the art activity was going on at La Jolla Museum of Art. And there was. . . . Guy Williams was teaching there. Another guy, named Don Dudley, who is in New York now. Malcom McLaine, who is a poet up here now, and Richard Allen Morris who's still down there. And I began to hang out with those guys, and Guy Williams was the real story. He had actually got a gallery in L.A., the David Stuart Gallery, and he was the big hero. And, you know, I think almost every two weeks, I would drive up to L.A. and look at shows. Well, I mean, you know, whatever the cycle was, maybe three weeks, and spend, you know. . . . And then Guy moved up here and was teaching at Chouinard, and I would come up. I would crash at his place, you know, and see shows and come back and. . . . Well also, where I began to get a taste for art was I had this one class—what you would call a remedial class—and saw the power art had for some of these kids that otherwise were just losers. I mean, there was a language for them somehow. And I began to really begin to tailor projects that would sort of tap into their imagination.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Like what?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, you know, I would let them, instead of having to do the obligatory duckies [laughing] with modeling clay, you know, they could make monsters or racing cars. You know, just try to keep pushing them. And I got into some pretty big arguments with the principal and supervisor and so on. But the head supervisor, art supervisor in the city, took some interest in me. I guess she thought I was pretty wacko, and then she hired me to be her assistant for a while and she tried to get me to go into art supervision. And I got my taste of that, and I didn't think I was interested and I. . . . Then what happened? I was. . . . Yeah, and at that time, I was sort of getting near the top of the salary scale in terms of. . . . The salary scale in the city schools, you go this way with degrees and units of college credits and this way in terms of years. So I was all the way up this way. All I had to do was put in more years, you know, I'd get the maximum salary, and I said. . . . You could see your life charted out before you. So "This doesn't seem very interesting." [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Your father would have been thrilled.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I know! I know! And so then I thought of well maybe, you know, becoming a principal, or a school principal or whatever, and I went checking around, asking, "What's the attraction here?" It was always, the results of my poll was that you just made more money. [laughs] Nobody seemed to really like it. And I said, "Well, I guess I can't do that." And I quit, and I said, "Well, I'm going just devote more time to painting." And so I started doing part-time jobs to support myself. The first one was okay, and then I didn't have enough money that way, and I had to take another one. And eventually I had about five part-time teaching jobs, and I said, "This is worse than when I had a full-time job." You know, it was this crazy life where I would teach one class, and run back to my studio and paint for a while, and then run to another class, come back and paint for a while, and that was my life.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Where in San Diego were you living then?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I was living at the family house. My father and my mother had died when I was first year of college, so there was plenty of room in the place, and so I didn't have much rent. And I had talked my father into using the back of a building he had owned. There was a laundromat in front, and the back was empty, and that was my first studio. And so my life was just teaching and painting and, you know, sharing work with Guy and Don and Richard Allen Morris and so on. And like

around the La Jolla Museum and seeing exhibits, and so on.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Were there any particular exhibitions at the museum that you saw that had a . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, the good thing about it is that they did have the . . . I can't think of any memorable ones, but I got along with going forays up into Los Angeles. You know, they did bring in contemporary art, so I got to see a lot of art. And . . . I'm trying to think, was there any? [pauses] Not really. Although I . . . One experience that pops to mind—and maybe more will come to mind here—was that that whole period was—at least for me, I don't know how it was in the rest of the state—but what one did was we entered these juried shows the museums put on, and there was . . . I mean they all had them. L.A. County had the most prestigious one. It was called Artists of Los Angeles County and Vicinity. And they always brought in some prestigious jurors, you know, like Clement Greenberg or . . . And it would always be a three-person jury. And this was the big show that everybody aspired to. And it was fairly . . . I guess these shows just began to dry up for one reason or another. I know the one in the L.A. County, the conventional wisdom is that dried it up was that more and more students would get in and fewer teachers would get into these shows. [laughter] So it wasn't a viable experience _____. But . . . And so I might . . . If you look at my early bio on me—a lot of it's probably taken out by now—but it's all of these little shows, you know.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah.

JOHN BALDESSARI: This museum, that . . . You know, Six Western States, or Three Northern States or, you know . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah. A Couple Counties and a Neighborhood.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Right, you know, and just one after another. You know, you send off your slides, and you pass that muster, and then you send off the painting, and that was it. And I do remember taking my paintings around when I left . . . Not when I left Otis, but I'd taken them around after a while. I got my father's pickup truck, loaded them all up with paintings, took 'em up to L.A., hit every gallery. And just no interest at all, and came back with my tail between my legs and didn't do it again until the late sixties.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Do you remember what galleries you went to?

JOHN BALDESSARI: No. God, I would have to go through a list of galleries that were around at the time. You know, all that were there. [pauses] Well, the most prestigious one was Ferus, and of course I didn't even dare go in there. [laughs] You know, nobody was interested. I do remember one comment. I don't know why I retained it. This guy said, well, they were not exactly his cup of tea.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [both chuckle]

JOHN BALDESSARI: So, let me see what . . . Oh, yeah, I was talking about this junior high school I was in and I quit. And then, in the middle of that, I had somebody, an administrator, call me up who ran a California Youth Authority camp up in the mountains, and he let's the . . . It's an honor camp, but if you try to escape, then you go to prison. And they have classes, and so this guy called me up and said, you know would I come up there and teach for a couple of months. He had to fill in; somebody had left. Probably a guy had been shot. [chuckles] Then I realized later that the guy had simply gone through all the personnel files and got the biggest teachers he could find.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You mean by height?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Height and weight, or whatever, right, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: God, right. So they couldn't push him around?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, really. Then you lived there, you know, and then on weekends you could.
...

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Where was this?

JOHN BALDESSARI: It was in Julian.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: In Julian?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, back in the hills, yeah. And I had a general secondary credential so I could theoretically teach other courses. And it was worse than that junior high school job I had. You know, these kids were hoods. And, you know, they have to have a five. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, these were the kids who had gotten thrown out of that school.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, exactly. And they would have maybe like a five-minute attention span in a forty-five minute class. And then there's this sort of epiphany that occurred, in that this little Mexican kid came up to me one day and said would I open up the arts and crafts room at night, so I assume he wanted to work there. And a light went on in my head, and I said, "Yeah, you know, I'll make a deal. If you guys sort of cool it in the academic classes, I'll make a tradeoff, and I'll open the classrooms for you at night where you can work." It worked like a charm. And I realized that art was more valuable for them than it was for me. [laughs] You know, that they had just ostensibly no social values at all that I shared, yet they cared more about art than I did. And that really had a lasting effect on me—and I think somehow turned me around, where I really thought about being an artist and not something one did in your spare time. Yeah. At least that's the way it always appears to me. And then what happened? I was teaching. . . . God, it's amazing _____. I think at the time. . . . San Diego Adult School, I was teaching a class, I was teaching children's classes at La Jolla Museum, University extension classes in painting, and at a junior college— College, Southwestern College—and. . . . That brings up to about '67 or so, I think.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: '67?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And then the university came into town. Well, it had been in town, but I mean they decided to open up an art department, and they had hired Paul Brach to be dean of the art school. And so I'd met him at a couple functions around town—at the La Jolla Museum and so on. And I got along okay with him, and he called me up one time and said, "Would you like to come and teach for us?" And he said, "I'll give you a better salary than what you're getting." At that time, I'd dropped all the other part time jobs and I was teaching full time at the Southwestern College, figuring that was just easier on me. And he said, "I'll give you a studio," and it seemed like heaven to me, you know, and I said, "Okay." Everybody else was from New York, and I realized later, or even then, that it was politically shrewd for him to do it, because I had by that time, a pretty good reputation, and that would sort of make some ties with the art community in the vicinity. So the first year that was David Antin and Helen and Newton Harrison. I mean, Helen wasn't an artist then, nor was Ellie Antin; they all came as wives. And Michael Todd in sculpture. Don Lewellyn who was Connie Lewellyn's husband at the time, who was teaching, running an extension program in San Diego, and who else? Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk, art historian. I don't know if she's still there or not.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Last I heard.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Is she still there?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah. But that was several years ago.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. I'm trying to think who else was there. And that was my real exposure to sort of, people from New York, and this changed my life. And David especially. He loved what I was doing and always promoted me as the best artist he'd seen around in California—and got me my first show in L.A. at Molly Barnes Gallery. I had since been around again with these. . . . That's when I just finished these photo and photo-and-text pieces on canvases. And I'd been around with those and nobody bit at all, and David said, "Well, let me. . . ." He said, "I know this woman." And he convinced Molly to show my works between two shows like for a week.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [chuckles] Filler.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Which I. . . . You know, so I did it. And then I guess the other show coming up after me, I guess there was some delay, so she left it up for a longer time. So I think it's three weeks. And that got me my first review in *Artforum*. Jane Livingston was at the L.A. County Museum. She was writing for *Artforum*.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: _____ [still had been her] then, in '67.

JOHN BALDESSARI: When were they new?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: That's what I'm trying to remember. It was either '67 or '68.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Around in there. _____ was here then. And the same night, Joseph Kosuth had opened with his first show also, and so she wrote about both shows in her review.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Where was it at? His show?

JOHN BALDESSARI: He was at Eugenia Butler Gallery, which turned out to be a very good gallery. And the museum wanted to put a hold on two [works—Ed.] and Maurice Tuchman put a hold on two for his own collection, and . . . nothing ever happened. [laughs] Maurice dropped his holds and dropped all but one hold on the L.A. County Museum. I think it was about three years later that he bought it. And, you know Maurice of course: You know, "hot, big, yeah, you and Warhol are next on our list." [laughter] "Sure, Maurice." And then when it came down, he wanted to get it for the original price, and so it was six hundred dollars, this piece they got. And now he claims that. . . . I've heard him talk at various occasions and say I got the young talent award that year, and I've always wanted to say, "Well, why didn't you give me the money for the award then, instead of six hundred dollars?" [laughter] Anyway. So. . . . But then. . . . Oh, yeah. And so that review then got me some attention in New York. Lucy Lippard had called me up, and she was putting together a show of conceptual art, and she had contacted me. And then David and Paul had given me various people to look up in New York, so I went in and was showing works around and realized it was all the wrong people to show things to. I mean, I didn't know at the time, because I had never met any artists really. But I was going around to mostly painters, you know.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Was this the first time you'd ever gone to New York?

JOHN BALDESSARI: As an artist. I'd gone there once before.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: As a civilian? [chuckles]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Civilian, yeah. And so I mean I'm showing my work to all these people. I didn't know who they were, really know who. You know, later I knew who they were, like I think one of them. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Like who?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Like Al Held was one, and. . . . Oh, God, what was. . . . Oh, what was it the . . . The English critic, the guy who coined art. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Oh, Lawrence. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Alloway, yeah. And Gregory [Battcock] was there, and I met him. And who were some of the others. . . . [pauses] I can't think right now. Nobody, you know, that were. . . . You know, all these sort of marginal artists. And nothing happened. And I think I was hitting about. . . . And plus this going down the gallery guide, or whatever, just on my own, and hitting about three galleries a day. And it was pretty unnerving. I remember walking into, I think it was Emmerich Gallery and, whoever it was, just losing it, you know, with the artist before me. You know, "If I have to see one more sheet of slides, I'm going to go crazy." I just turned around and walked out. [laughter] And then on the last day before I was going back, I went into Richard Feigen Gallery, and I was thinking, "I don't know anything about this gallery," and walked in. And the guy you may have met—I think he's vice president of something he's now [at]—Michael Findlay. And he's the first person that really looked. He said, "Well, these are not, these are kind of interesting." And he said, "It's too bad I've just put on a show," he said, "of artists using language in their work."

[Tape 2, side A]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with John Baldessari on April 4, 1992, at Baldessari Studio in Santa Monica. The interviewer is Christopher Knight, and this the second cassette. And Richard Feigen was just about to put you in a show.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: No, no, no. Michael Findlay.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Michael Findlay was about to not put you in a show.

JOHN BALDESSARI: And he said, "How long are you in town?" And I said, "Well, I'm leaving tonight." And he said, "Well, you know, there's somebody that might be interested in your work, a friend of mine, Kynaston McShine, who's at the Jewish Museum." And so I ran up there, and he was out or couldn't see me but, "Please. . . ." You know, typical Kynaston fashion: "Please leave the material." [laughter] Well, I didn't know then, of course. And then I got them back a month later, that, "Well, thank you, but no thanks." And then what happened? Then I got a letter from Michael saying, could I send one piece, or two. They were going to open up kind of a warehouse in this area called SoHo. [laughter] And where they were just going to have things there where they could show clients and [they wondered—Ed.] if they could have a couple of pieces. So I said, "Yeah. Sure. Of course." And I sent them, and then they said. . . . And then the only. . . . You know, Paula Cooper was the only gallery there at the time, and they were the second one. And so then Michael wrote again and said, "Well, they actually thought they might put on a show." And there was a three-person show. And I could look up who the other three people were; you wouldn't probably know them. I don't remember them. They just dropped out of sight. It was a three-person show. And so I showed a selection of image and text pieces or text pieces. I don't know if there were any reviews. Oh, there were, yeah!

You know who my first review was?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: No.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Who was not yet an artist. Vito Acconci.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Vito Acconci reviewed that show?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Wow! Did he like it?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So that was in 1970?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. All right, and then maybe by that time I . . . And then I switched galleries in L.A., and I'd gone to Eugena Butler because I just . . . Molly Barnes was just too much for me. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Before we get too far I want to go back to something about Rico Lebrun.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Sure, um hmm.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You said in one of his final lectures he spent the whole time talking about a painting of yours. Do you remember that painting? I mean, can you tell me what it was like?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, well, it was collage sort of painting, and pretty stupid I think, looking back on it, but I mean. . . . But I could see why he liked it, because it was a more elemental reduced form of what he was doing. He was doing sort of collage paintings. It was just pieces of paper that I had, with pencil or charcoal probably, had modulated the surface, so that it was bent or modulated, curved, what have you. It was like trompe l'oeil, even though it was flat painting. And then had arranged all of those, pasted them together so they had some sort of flow of light and dark, and then had put over washes of white paint so you could barely see the modulation. It was almost all white, yet there was this modulation of a two-dimensional surface. And completely nonobjective.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Completely non-objective.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, yeah. And that was it.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And he responded to non-objective.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I guess he thought . . . You know, that was probably where he might, would have gone, possibly, maybe. [laughs] He was doing similar things, but they were like these Grunewald figures.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Like Cubist Grunewald.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And the other thing that I wanted to ask you about school days, like at Otis, I would guess, but San Diego State as well. Were there fellow students that were of any kind of influence to you at Otis—since you were at Otis '57, '58.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Not at San Diego State, because all the instructors there had been students at San Diego State. [laughs] You know, it was the kind of faculty where you would. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: They stayed on.

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . do two or three paintings a year and enter them at the show at the San Diego Fine Art Gallery, have 'em in an exhibit at the San Diego, the art, the local library, or what have you, you know, like that. And the only real artist to me was this guy, whose name was Gene Swiggett.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Gene Swiggett?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Swiggett, S-w-i-g-g-e-t-t. He'd gone to Claremont Graduate School and had studied with Henry McFee. And Henry McFee was a, had a lot of sort of Picasso. I don't know if you know his paintings.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I do know his paintings. My master's thesis was partially McFee.

JOHN BALDESSARI: [laughs] Yeah, okay. Well, then you know how it all fits in and how that can segue very easily into LeBrun, right, yeah. And with bits of Tamayo in there, I suppose. And Ben Shahn, I suppose, and what have you. And then at Otis, it was just really a classical education. I mean, just hours of drawing from the model, sculpting from the model. And one of the painting instructors was. . . . Oh, God, he was on the. . . . What was his name? He was on the faculty of the Famous Artists School and. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Of the Famous Artists School? _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. God, what's his name? You'd know him. He did kind of [George] Bellows-like paintings of brawling sailors and fighters, and that sort of Ash Can school and. . . . Fletcher Martin.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Fletcher Martin.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And the school was run by. . . . Oh, what was his name? He was very influential in art at the time. He started the Claremont graduate school program. He was a water colorist. And he designed the Otis building and he did all the banks. He designed the banks. [Millard Sheets—Ed.]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Oh, yeah, of course and those murals.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Murals. Yeah, the Ames. . . . Arthur Ames did the murals.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: He was terrible. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, and he was. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: He was a nightmare.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, but he was very powerful in art in L.A.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yes, he had the support of. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Anyway.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: It's going to drive me crazy till I think of it.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. It'll pop into mind. Yeah, so it was pretty classical, and actually I guess one of the reasons I wanted to go into art especially, is my milieu, I guess, was Abstract expressionists—Jackson Pollock, what have you—and I was just tired of hearing that stuff that artists can't draw, you know, they don't have _____. So I just drew from the model all the time. And I was at a student. . . . Was it a student show? Well, anyway it was at Otis, and the head art critic at the time, Arthur. . . . No, it wouldn't be Arthur Miller. Who would it be? On the L.A. Times.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: That's Miller then.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, was it? Anyway, he said it was. . . . He singled out a drawing of mine and he said, "It's nice to know somebody can draw." And I guess that's all I needed and I just stopped. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: The power of art criticism.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I have never had a use for it since. [laughter] But somebody had to tell me that, that I could draw. And I think that's when I left.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Where. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, but, anyway, you were asking about fellow artists. The only one that. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I mean was [Ed] Ruscha around or [Robert] Irwin or any of those. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, but they were all at Chouinard. And I remember going down to Chouinard, and the big teacher down there—I sat in a couple of the courses, just auditing—was. . . . I can't think of it now. He's still around New York painting. Reubens, Richard Reubens.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Richard Reubens.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. He was the hot teacher. And I remember my first exposure to Irwin was walking into a class and listening for a while and it was Irwin teaching a painting class and everybody was doing the same painting, which was a blank field and across it like this would be a piece of twisted cloth, and they were trying to articulate the folds in cloth. But they were all doing the same variation of the same painting.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Hmm. [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: I guess Bob was doing his line paintings about that time. [laughs] And I never even met any of those guys until much later. And by that. . . . And then I left and went down to, back to San Diego. But no, but the only guy that I can remember that you would know, and he's a favorite of. . . . He doesn't show around here, but he's a favorite of Maurice Tuckman, because now and then he'll have a canvas at the. . . . Norman Zammitt.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Norman Zammitt.

JOHN BALDESSARI: You know his stuff?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, [with] the [long] stripes.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. He was the best student. He could do anything.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: At Otis?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, yeah, he was great. You know, there's always the best student at school. He was the best student. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So, when you were a student then, at these various and sundry places, what artists living and/or dead were you interested in?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I . . . From one memory, the first artist that entered my consciousness I think was Matisse. And that was my first year of college. I had an art orientation class, and I didn't even know who Matisse or Picasso were when I went to college. So this was all news to me. That's how little I knew. Little! I didn't know anything about art. And I saw Matisse, you know, I was just revolted. This isn't art, you know. And I remember the instructor, the head of the department, a guy who was very well known in art down . . . I mean in social circles. Everett G. Jackson, and he . . . "Mr. Baldessari," he said, "I'll bet you really fall in love with him at the end of this course." I said, "Bullshit!" you know, and I did. [both chuckle] And eventually, when I got to teaching myself how to paint, I would copy Matisses. And Cezanne was a big influence on me, I think, and Giotto, and then Ben Shawn, I think for a while and then [Grant]. . . And sort of segue into . . . And then somehow I got into surrealism, from that to Dada artists, and then to Duchamp and like that, I think. That's sort of where I ended up. But I think my influence is really a lot of painting until I began to see the possibilities of getting beyond that. But, I mean, art was painting; painting was art when I went to school. There wasn't anything beyond it.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: How would you . . . I don't want this to sound like a stupid question, but it will. [laughter] How would you characterize the artistic scene and/or situation in San Diego when you were going to school? In San Diego and Los Angeles.

JOHN BALDESSARI: What period of time?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Like '55 to maybe early sixties, '62, '63.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, the only contemporary art one would see would be at La Jolla Museum.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Who would go to the museum?

JOHN BALDESSARI: The La Jolla Museum?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I mean who would, aside from you and the few artists that you . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, people living in La Jolla, you know. [laughs] I mean, it was . . . You know, because I guess it was a vacation home for a lot of people living in New York, or what have you. I mean, my memory is like there being stock market brokers on almost every corner. You know, and Rancho Santa Fe. So I guess, this was imported culture for them. At the San Diego Fine Arts Gallery, there wasn't too much. And they too would have their big local show as did the La Jolla Museum, a juried show. But the really hip place was La Jolla, the La Jolla Museum. And there was an art community, but no private galleries, and before I left there was . . . And I forget his name was, but he was kind of hip. He started the gallery when some of us began showing downtown. But all the galleries were in L.A. And I guess when Guy [Williams—Ed.] got the show at David Stuart Gallery, he went up to teach at, he got a job at Chouinard, and his wife then went to work for David Stewart. I mean, director, whatever. But no, I mean, art was in L.A.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So, when you came to L.A., what did the art situation seem like?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, the most. . . . I mean, the two prestigious galleries, I guess, there were Ferus and Felix Landau Galleries, as I recall.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: But Ferus to you felt like a closed club?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, yeah. I mean, I was this novice. I didn't know anything. And then there got to be other. . . . And then there was another hip gallery that started at the time, Rolf Nelson Gallery. Oh yeah, and Nick Wilder and. . . . And actually at that point, I should say something. Nick Wilder was very supportive of me when I first, with these canvas pieces. And he said, "I don't know what you're doing, but there's somebody I know who might be interested in them," which turned out to be Dick Bellamy. And so I put up all my things in Guy Williams's studio, and when Dick Bellamy came into town, I took him over to see them, and he didn't say anything, but he stayed a long time and looked and looked and looked. And he said, "I'm not quite sure what you're up to either, but there are some artists in New York that you might feel you have some connection with." And so he gave me a whole list, and it turned out to be this. . . . It was like, Verdun Graham, you know, Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, [_____—Ed.] Mueller, and some. . . . And that's how I met all those guys. And I found people that thought a lot similarly like I had.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: How aware were you before you went to New York in '68, '69 whenever that was, how aware were you of developments that were happening in New York with Pop and that whole scene?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I guess. . . . You know, I was getting *ARTnews*, and seeing things. Oh, another influential gallery, shows that made a lot of impression on me, were Virginia Dwan Galleries. She had a lot of different Pop artists. I remember Yves Klein's show making a lot of impression on me because it just defied everything I knew about art.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And what was in that show?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Just monochrome blue paintings, all the same size. I said, "This can't be art." You know, but in the analysis it snapped my. . . . It snapped something there. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And what about Europe? Was there any awareness of. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, okay, yeah. My connection with Europe was that. . . . Well, the first thing that comes to mind that somebody along the line said, "Your work is more European." I don't know who it was that told me that. I didn't even know what that meant. But anyway, it did register; I remember that. And, yeah. Michael Findlay said, "There is a critic that's based here in New York that is a critic for the Frankfurter *Allegemeine*. . . ." Al-uh-guh-mine, is that the way you say it?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Allegemaine, yeah.

JOHN BALDESSARI: ". . . and he's written, wrote about your first show and wrote about your second show, and would like to meet you." So next time I was in the city, we got together, and we hit it off, and he said. . . . He had been writing about my work in the paper in Germany, and he said, "There's a friend of mine who is just starting a gallery, I'd gone to school with, and I think he'd be interested in maybe showing your work. Would you like to meet him?" "Sure." Turned out to be Konrad Fisher. And then that got to be my. . . . Well, actually it wasn't my first show. It was Art in _____.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, [Amsterdam].

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Okay, so that's like 1970-something when you _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Around in there, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: In the sixties, it seems that it's like your information about what art was and where it was and all of that was progressively getting larger, I mean, as well as opening up. At what point did—if it did—did Europe enter that equation? I mean, just as some kind of. . . . Oh look, a cute mouse. [literally]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Ohh. [laughter]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I mean, did you have any knowledge, aside from the occasional show at Virginia Dwan?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: _____ European during the sixties?

JOHN BALDESSARI: No, all my art information was sort of imported. I would buy art journals and so on from Europe and so on. Sure, yeah. But only in a second-hand way. No actually seeing stuff unless it came to L.A. or occasionally New York. Not even New York. Yeah it would be in L.A. And there were, like from Europe. . . . Other than Klein, I guess there wouldn't be any _____. I'd have to check. I mean, who would have. . . . Well, I do remember the Duchamp show at the Pasadena Museum. I was very impressed by that. A big impact. I mean, actually seeing that stuff instead of, you know, reading about it.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Seeing the original. [laughs] Original canvas.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, actually, I think, I've always had this theory that a lot of progress. . . . Well, I don't know if you talk about progress nowadays, but changes in art history come about from misinformation. Of, you know, some artist in the Midwest, you know, reproduction, and not understanding somebody's work and spinning off from there in a completely oblique fashion that probably wouldn't have happened if he or she saw the original work. And I think a lot of my life is importing information to National City, and San Diego, and so on via journals, you know. So probably a lot of it was what I assumed the work to be, and not what it was. And so getting a tape that might not have occurred—although this is speculation—that might not have occurred if I actually had seen the work or had been around when there was not _____ generated.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Okay, in the sixties the scene in Los Angeles was beginning to get some attention.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Um hmm.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: But you were still in San Diego, sort of seeing it from afar.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Um hmm. Yeah, what held sway in L.A. was what we now, what was called the finish-fetish people, and that just doesn't interest me.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You had no interest in it.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Not a bit, not a bit. And actually, that was the one big obsession with me when I got the job at Cal Arts, was to bring in an alternative aesthetic to L.A. I mean, I had aspirations that

large. [laughter] You know, I really, I just thought it was all stupid. And I was hired to teach painting at Cal Arts. And I said, "Listen, I'm not going to teach painting." And I said, "Can I teach something a little bit more along the lines of what I'm doing?"

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What was it about the "Cool School" that bugged the hell out of you. [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Gosh, its impenetrability, I think, something. . . . It just. . . . [pause] I remember reading articles of Don Judd, you know in *The Nation* at the time. And, I mean, I liked his works a lot, so it wasn't about that kind of impenetrability. It just seemed stupid. [laughs] Which I think I've turned out to be right about; it was stupid. [laughter] My instincts were good. It just seemed to be a dead end.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So while that "stupid" stuff was going on, you were in San Diego locked in a dark room making photo-emulsion paintings. Tell me about how that came about, how the photo emulsion paintings. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I think I've said it in Coosje [van Bruggen]'s books, but I just. . . . I was at the end of my tether so to speak. And, well, I guess another epiphany or sorts. I just said, "I wonder what'd happen if you just gave people what they ostensibly want?" Which is not a lot of paint smeared around. [laughs] They want to recognize things. And I said what, you know, just take people what they are. I guess, they do read. I guess maybe that was too big an assumption, but. . . . "Magazines, newspapers," I said, "Well, I'll make it look like that." Either text, you know, or text and _____.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Photo and a caption.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, one of that. That simple, yeah. I said, "I wonder if that could be art?"

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: It seems like such a leap, though.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, but you've got to realize where I was. I mean it was a cultural desert, number one. I'm in a building, in a room. . . . I mean, there no windows, just a door, surrounded by books and magazines. That could have been anywhere, you know. And it just, by process of trying this and put this and this and this, you know, it's just by an evolution, I got to that point. I said, "Well, why not? Let's try this." I mean, it didn't seem like a leap at the time, you know.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Really?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I mean, it just seemed like the next step. I was very excited about it. The first one I did was a text piece, and I had it up on my wall, and I said, "That. . . ." I mean, aside from doing what I wanted to do, I said, "It actually looks pretty good." [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Beauty.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, God, that word again. But, you know, _____ it held the wall.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah. And at the time that you were doing this, were you conscious of other related work?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, see, again, you've got to consider the milieu. If I were like in L.A., and had to show that to a friend there, I would be scared to death, you see.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And had what?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I would have been scared to death to having to show it to friends.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Oh, I see. Oh, so you had no one to show it to, so it didn't matter.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I would be laughed at.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Uh huh.

JOHN BALDESSARI: You know, and so there were just those few buddies I had, you know, I could say, "Hey, you want to see something really crazy lookin'?" You know, they'd say, "Hey, that's great. Let's have a beer," you know.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What was their response? I mean, Richard Allen Morris and Al [_____—Ed.]?

JOHN BALDESSARI: You know, we did have a great sort of camaraderie like, "What the hell, just do what you want to do." I mean, there wasn't any censuring going on. And I think at that time, who I was really probably showing my works to was Richard. We were pretty close. Guy had since been up in L.A., and Don [Llewellyn—Ed.] had moved to New York. And there was this sort of cowboy artist I sort of knew, and we were sitting around, and we liked to _____. We would do western scenes, and that sort of like. . . . I mean, see, there was not, this really didn't matter. So I mean that. . . . And I didn't care either, you know. You know, in my mind, I was never going to get a show. I was never going to get out of teaching high school or community college, and since I'd since gotten married, and I was just going to. . . . You know, there it is again.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: This is very _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: And that was going to be my life, you know. I was going to have kids and teach and do art. And so why shouldn't I do what I wanted to do. I guess the real turning point was getting this job at UCSD, and then dramatically shifting my. . . .

[Tape 2, side B]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: . . . say then, that whatever career ambitions developed. . . . I mean, the realization that it was possible to be an artist in the bigger world, that in a way that came after the fact. I mean, you sort of stumbled into this situation. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And certain things began to happen and. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Art was always something. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: . . . _____ began to look back and say suddenly I have this career ambition.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Well, I didn't know. I mean, for years I couldn't use the word artist. First, my problem was I thought it meant Art with a capital "A", and then I began to tell myself, "Well, with a small "A" it's just like something you do. And sometimes it's done well, but most times not so well. It's like a plumber. It doesn't mean you're a good plumber, just you're a plumber.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [laughs] Right.

JOHN BALDESSARI: And so then I was a little bit more easy with the term. But even then I wouldn't say to people. . . . I said I taught. Yeah, and so eventually, it. . . . It's a little bit like that old saw about life is what happens to you when you're doing something else. All of a sudden, I was an artist, you know. I mean, I had to admit it.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: When did you admit it to yourself? I mean, when did you start to think of yourself as an artist?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I don't know that it was any single point. [pauses] I mean, it all got pretty unsettling, you know, where I got hired at UCSD, and I said well, "Why would anybody hire me?" And here were all these people from New York, and they were, you know. . . . Well, not necessarily that all the faculty was fairly well known. David Antin had a growing reputation as a critic, I think. And I guess he was my closest friend. I enjoyed him, but nobody knew about Helen and Newton [Harrison.], nobody knew about. . . . Well, Mike Todd came from New York, but he was sort of, had done a few shows. And I guess the hottest artist was Paul Brach. He had shown at the Jewish Museum with his abstract painting show. [laughing] And he would bring out. . . . he knew a lot of people so he would bring out. . . . Like Roy Lichtenstein would come out a do a gig or what have you. I knew Roy Lichtenstein was a real artist and. . . . Actually, I mean, a lot of the people I really was interested were the poets they would bring out, and I had never met real poets either, and that was fun. And the first show that David [] did was a big Fluxus show. I had never had really seen any of that stuff before. And so I think, yeah, right around in there and then maybe my first show, you know—Molly Barnes and Feigen—and this writeup with Jane Livingston, I guess it was right around in there that it all, "Something's happening here."

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You just mentioned poetry. Where did your interest in poetry, philosophy, reading. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: I don't know. Probably from my mother. Maybe. . . . It's a suspicion, again, that this would get me out of the world I was in, you know. It was a way again of beginning to live in your head, rather than living in National City. [laughs] Probably that.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And so all of these things were coming together and the photo-emulsion paintings were being made. How did the decision to "cremate your life" come about?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, that was interesting. Well, by that time I had switched duty. I was in another empty building of my father's, which was a movie theatre, and he couldn't rent it out. It didn't have a level floor. And I said, "Could I use that?" He said, "Sure." So I moved in there, and I was painting and painting, and I guess again, another epiphany. [laughs] My life is just a string of epiphanies. [said tongue in cheek—Trans.] [laughter]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, right.

JOHN BALDESSARI: But, again, sitting all alone in this big theatre, no windows again. It was sealed off. And this was in Lincoln Acres, California, which you've probably never heard of.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Lincoln Acres?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Where's that?

JOHN BALDESSARI: This is a little squalid place out sandwiched between National City and Chula Vista.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I've never heard of it.

JOHN BALDESSARI: And you're not likely to. Anyway, then there's this. . . . My father built on speculation this movie theatre for these operators, and then all the movie business went bust, you know, with television coming out, and it was a single-use building. So it just was there empty. So I would drive out there, that would be my studio, and I'd close the door, and that was my world, this semi-lighted space. But the good thing about it was I could have all my paintings up around, and I could look at them. See what I've done and what looked good, and what didn't look good, [stank]. And all of a sudden, this epiphany again. And all of a sudden it just sort of hit me that am I gonna do, my whole life is going to, rearranging things in a rectangle. [laughter] "Yeah, if I keep on doing like this, I am. And I'm gonna have this bloody building full." And then I was more and more aware of art could be something else. You know, having done these canvas works, beginning to go into them I mean at the time, in the midst of them. And it seemed like that was leading me to an area that was beyond painting. I mean, I remember a very conscious thing was that I, that the only signal that they would be art is, that was known, was that they'd be on canvas. I mean, I had this idea that, well, it doesn't matter what's on the surface, it's that it reads as art because it's on stretcher bars and canvas. People accept it as art, and then beyond that it's what you do inside of it. And I realized that anybody could do those things. I could even, you know, I could even have them done. And of course the next series of works I did were commissioned paintings. And then I realized that I was in some other ballgame at that time. And that, having done all these paintings, I was on the wrong track. And I just might as well start a new life and get it behind me. I had a lot of games. There's a list here somewhere I've got around here of all the things I was going to do with them. One of the. . . . It had to do with fragmentation and atomization, one of the plans, I think where I was going to photograph them all and make microdots out of them. Like in the spy novel hide them between stamps and send them to my friends. [laughs] But you get the idea. I wanted to decimate things and live. . . . You know, like I mentioned living in my mind. You know, I didn't need all of this residue. I didn't need this big theatre right now. It was the wrong way to go, and I just had to do something that demonstrated that. And so I decided to make a ritualized act out of it. And the only way I can explain it was it's like dieting. You have to do something dramatic, or otherwise it's not going to happen. And that's why I did it.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: When you decided to burn, to cremate your past work, you didn't get rid of everything.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, here are the conditions I imposed on myself. Everything up and to these text-and-image pieces, I considered, where I didn't really do it with my own hand. . . . And all that. . . . Everything I had in my own possession. Obviously there are some works that survived. Not a lot I might add. I think my sister has two or three. I actually have one that I found in some boxes. I can show it to you.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I'd like to see it.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, okay. [moving away from microphone] Well, Motherwell actually had it in a show. You might have seen it [inaudible] Yeah, there is a collage I had done in '61, looked pretty Motherwellian.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, it is. It's Motherwell and Diebenkorn.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, and it's just _____.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yes.

JOHN BALDESSARI: _____ something else. [inaudible]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So these are the only two that you have.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Oh, I have slides of [mostly] all that stuff.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Chris, I have to go to the john for a second _____.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, go ahead.

[Interruption in taping]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: When you did the cremation piece and, as you describe it, it was a sort of ritualized death and you went through all the steps, and you placed a notice in the newspaper in the San Diego Union. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yes, right, yes.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: . . . announcing the death of your former life, you had to go to the newspaper office to place this notice. What did they say when you filled out the form. I mean, how did they respond to this?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, just completely flat.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Just blank.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. It was under a legal notices section. I put it in as a legal notice. "On such and such a date, this act was committed." And I had a notarized statement made up which I brought in. I said, "I just want this printed."

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And notarized. And the notary didn't say anything?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Just perfectly normal.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. The only good thing about it all. Well, I shouldn't say good, but amusing. First I thought it was just, I mean, it was going to be totally conceptual that everybody was going to turn me down _____ crematorium. And I think I'd done three or four, and I finally found this one. And maybe they were just hard up, you know. They said, yeah, they would do it, but after hours. [laughter] And now I know what I started to say. And they guy that physically did the cremating turned out to be an art major in college.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Really, great.

JOHN BALDESSARI: And so he thought I was completely wacko, but there was this camaraderie, in that we were both involved in art. And so he would bring out. . . . I guess trying to find something that would weld a bond, or whatever, you know, he'd bring out like. . . . I remember him bringing out

this whole box of things that wouldn't burn, during the cremating. You know pins in the legs, and so on like that. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Major [dental] fillings.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Well, I guess, did you read this lately now that the silicon breast implants won't cremate?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: No.

JOHN BALDESSARI: They just said they gum up all the machinery. And now. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And explode?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, now they have, if you want to get cremated and have an [implant], you have to sign—or your heirs or whatever—have to swear that you haven't had breast implants, or if you have any they have to be removed before you can be cremated. [laughter]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Well, that seems like a good enough to stop. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Stop right there with that, at that note.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: For today. Horrible.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, yeah, and the other good thing. I don't know if you're. . . . I think it was in the MOCA show, but, anyway, for the ashes I chose an urn that was in the shape of a book, but that just seemed fitting to have in that show.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What did you do with all the rest of the ashes? Because there must have been a heck of a lot more ashes than were in the book.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I think they're at [Sonnabend] right now or something _____ in storage.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You mean, so you do have them all?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [laughs] You do!

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, and I think. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: There must be boxes and boxes.

JOHN BALDESSARI: No, no, no, actually not. It's either. . . . What was it? Seven or nine and a half, or seven and a half. Anyway I could look it up. And the box is just a silver box, that wide, about that long, and about like that [high].

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: About so long.

JOHN BALDESSARI: And that's for one adult body, and then I had one child-size [body] he also used for amputated limbs. But it came to either seven and a half or nine and a half was my total output. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So what's going to happen to your remains? Will they be sprinkled over the National Gallery?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, well, no, I did do the one extension. I guess I had a . . . That was another crazy thought I had at the time. And I actually think Coosje maybe talked about it in that book, about I had this reoccurring [sic] dream of an airplane being disassembled, something like that, and all its component parts, and then the metal of the parts being reduced—you know, going back into the earth and so on and coming out of the earth and going back into this big silver airplane again. And I began, I guess, looking at art that way. You know, the pigment sticking out of the earth, and the tubes, and on the canvas were the plants and so on, stretcher bars were trees and so on, and then going back again. So I had the same idea for these ashes. I was being reductive. And then I made these cookies out of them, actually, after, and then people would eat the cookies, and they would be [shat, shot] out into the ground again, and _____ renew this whole loop again. And I guess it was some. . . . I think it came about because I began doing serial work this other time too. And I always would go into a museum and look at paintings like frames in a film and wondering what the frame was that might have been before it, you know, or after it. Or if it became a wide angle shot, what would, what was, how did the artist see beyond the frame, and so on. And really going about at it in a sort of cinematic photographic way, and I guess it was just a vague irritation of the frozen-moment idea. And I said, "Well, there are a lot of other moments that could have been frozen, why this one?" [laughs] Or something like that. And just thinking that. . . . I guess, just restless, you know. I mean like, "Why this, rather than that one?"

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: It also sounds a lot like little Johnny Baldessari pulling nails out of. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Disassembling. Maybe, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, disassembling and sorting out water faucets.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Maybe, maybe. I guess a lot of it's just lashing out, because I didn't know how to be an artist, and all this time spent alone in the dark in these studios and importing my culture and constant questions. I'd say, "Well, why is this art? Why isn't that art?" And I guess, yeah, that just [felt, filled] a lot of this, that, like, well. . . . I mean, these stupid questions that we all ask ourselves: "Who makes art? Why is it art?" and so on. "Why is it not art?"

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So what did it feel like when you were at the crematorium burning this stuff up? Was it. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, kind of exhilarating. I didn't feel sad at all. Yeah, I just felt like getting rid of a lot of baggage, I guess—you know, that I was off on some new life.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And then you went back to this movie theatre and it was empty.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Yeah. And then I didn't. . . . I mean then the physicality of the thing was very little, and I got more into art as books, films, video, that didn't take any space.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And how long after the cremation piece did you move to Los Angeles?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Probably within a year. Seventy. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Within a year.

JOHN BALDESSARI: It seems like that. Like I was at UCSD from '68 to '70. Went to L.A. in '70, so it

the cremation would have been around '68, '69, I guess, somewhere, '70.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah. I think I wrote it down somewhere. It was the summer. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. I'd have to check. So I'm sure that was. . . . I don't know whether that was hand in glove, but I just think it's all been together, like L.A. would be a new life and everything, you know, just start out afresh, _____. Yeah, I remember I was just. . . . I remember John Coplans who was then head of the Pasadena Museum. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: The Pasadena Museum.

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . coming to my gallery on the behest of, I think it was Paul Brach, and looking around in just utter bewilderment.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Coming to where?

JOHN BALDESSARI: To my studio and looking at these things.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: In San Diego?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. He was at a lecture gig down there, I guess, at the university.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: After the cremation?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Uhhh. . . . I'm not sure. But I remember I was specifically showing him these pieces.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: The photo emulsions.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. I mean, I hadn't. . . . They were done. . . . I hadn't cremated all of these things yet. They had happened, and I cremated things afterward and it seemed like I was on this new path. I just always remember the thing that he said. He just looked around for a long time and he said, "I can't show these." And then I guess he. . . . I can't be so naive to think that that wasn't a hope or something, but I mean that [had] never come up. I said, "Well, thank you for looking." Yeah, so I mean, I've gotta say I owe a lot to David Antin for giving me confidence in what I was doing. He was my first believer, so to speak.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Is there any aspect of anything we've covered today that you want to add something to? Tomorrow we'll move on to the. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, the cookie recipe. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: The cookie recipe. Canvas cookies.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I actually did. . . . I got it someplace. I didn't make up the recipe. It was just a standard cookie recipe, but in it says, "ashes, one cup," whatever. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Chocolate chips. Did they have chocolate chips?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, that would [made it] very famous, right, to have some. . . .

[Tape 3, side A]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I have to do my intro here. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with John Baldessari on April 5, 1992, at Baldessari Studio in Santa Monica. The interviewer is Christopher Knight and this is cassette number three. Do you remember the sentence you were on.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Hah! Where did I leave off? I didn't mark my place. [laughs] Where were we?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: We were. . . . It was circa 1970, and in 1970 is when you came to. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Cal Arts.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: . . . to teach. So the first thing I wanted to ask you is, when you finally moved to Los Angeles permanently from San Diego, how would you describe the art scene that you found here at that moment?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, on one hand, I mean, I would rather have art to look at—any art—rather than no art. I mean, there's always some nourishment to be found—even a square inch of a canvas that might look good. On the other hand, I felt very much out of step, and not a lot of art around me to encourage my own convictions. So my own convictions came from things I had read and assumptions I had made out of my reading and looking and that sort of thing. But nevertheless I kept looking, and I suppose amongst artists that appealed to me and I suppose are pretty much the same ones that appeal to me now. I mean, certainly Ed Ruscha and Bob Irwin, and. . . . In some oblique way Ed Kienholz, because he just seemed so far afield from everybody. I mean it's the phenomenon that sort of interested me. And that he left town, that didn't surprise me.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Didn't surprise you, why?

JOHN BALDESSARI: That he left L.A.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, why? Why didn't it surprise you?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, because I don't think there really was any. . . . I just felt he could have got more support in Europe for what he was doing. And I think that may have happened. It looks like it's probably happened; I don't know. And the stuff that was touted, you may. . . . Even. . . . Well, not. . . . I don't think I've gotten over it, but it's that sort of thing like that, you know, maybe at three o'clock in the morning, you'd have flashes, "Well, could I possibly be wrong?" [laughter] I mean, if it is, we're in deep trouble, you know, but that's hindsight. But I mean I just couldn't understand all the acclaim. You know, like people, you know, I'd sort of group 'em together, call 'em the Venice Artists with Racine. And which is an interesting. . . . Just parenthetically, I think it's interesting that, important that artists get out of L.A. because otherwise they can make assumptions like that. Well, you know, if Billy Al Bengston is the best artist in the world, then I must, I should aspire to that or, you know, that's a model, or something like that. But then you begin to travel, and you see that that art doesn't have much currency any other place in the world, and you realize it's all about who the gatekeepers are. But that was pretty early on, and I didn't have that insight. I just felt that this didn't make much sense to me, you know, so. . . . And then it became that sort of second generation of the Dill brothers and [Chuck—Ed.] Arnoldi, and that still didn't make any sense to me. And then I always thought Ed was a sort of interesting figure in that he had no less attention, but he could also, he was also a good artist, and that always sort of puzzled me. [laughs] That didn't puzzle me, but I was always fascinated by it, and it still fascinates me that he can have that universal appeal. And so, I think, yeah, it was Ed, principally, and Bob Irwin that I think probably I held in highest regard. And then trying to. . . . And the shows that came into town. I remember Warhol's show at Irving Blum

greatly influenced me. So, you know, those soup cans lined up in a row, and. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Which would have been earlier than 1970.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And also at that time, I shouldn't neglect the. . . . Maybe it was. . . . My dates are pretty bad, but Pasadena Museum. I guess they were still there.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: They were still there, until '71 I think.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, some pretty good shows there—Don Judd and again Warhol. And the influence of [this, just] Walter Hopps being around; I thought he was very good.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Did you meet him then?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I didn't know him until later. And what else? I think the first show at L.A. County Museum that Maurice Tuchman did had a great impact on me.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Which? The sculpture or. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: No, New York sculpture. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Oh, New York painting?

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . painting, sculpture, whatever, you know.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: The abstract [expressionists].

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, because I was able to see a lot of work. But, as I mentioned to you yesterday, one of the things that was in my mind when I was at Cal Arts that. . . . Well, I felt that it wouldn't do any good to replicate that aesthetic in any way and I. . . . To try to convey. . . . start creating the conditions for some alternative aesthetic, and then I began to immediately get myself in charge of the visiting artists' program. [laughter] Which I had also admit, which I. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Was that. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, go ahead.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I was just going to say, is that something you learned from David Antin?

JOHN BALDESSARI: No, actually I found out, I devised that technique when I was at Southwestern Junior College, and I ran a very vigorous visiting artists program there. Mostly people from L.A.; I think totally. But, I mean, pretty good for a junior college at that time. You know, we had Sam Francis down there once and Big Daddy Roth and Maurice Tuchman, for what he was worth, but nobody knew about him then. You know, he was pretty hot and heavy, but that [the Getty], Maurice, Morris. And various L.A. artists coming down. And I saw the value of having artists around as models. You know, it seems like such a simple equation, but it hadn't dawned on anybody. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: If you've never had one, I suppose it's _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And I think that. . . . You know, I had mentioned yesterday that not having artists as models, and that I was early thirties before I met a practicing artist, and Rico LeBrun at that, I could see the need for it. [laughter] Yes, and I did the same thing at U.C.S.D. I had a whole list of artists coming out there. And David [_____—Ed.] and I worked very well back to

back, because he was inviting a lot of poets. And so it was a pretty exciting program. And then the same thing at Cal Arts.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Can you explain what your interest was in Irwin's work at that time was? The connection with Ruscha seems very clear.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, minimalism, that always interests me. I mentioned yesterday, I followed the writings of Don Judd in *The Nation*, subscribe to it particularly for that reason.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: For Judd.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. I mean, if you consider the absurdity of the situation this guy teaching high school, whatever, down in National City, subscribing to *The Nation* to read Don Judd, it is pretty bizarre. [laughter]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: But I was very taken the first time I saw this work of his at the Green Gallery in New York, and, I don't know, maybe it's just my alter ego or something like that, but I've been very much influenced by him. You know, if one can call it that, but. . . . Reductivism or whatever you want to call it. And for that reason Irwin did interest me. And I suppose that my teacher side would respond to his thoroughness side, I suppose.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: At Cal Arts, can you describe the program? Because Cal Arts was relatively raw then. [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Well, it's easy to go back now and try to sort out the chaos, but at the time it seemed totally chaotic.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Where was it in 1970?

JOHN BALDESSARI: In Burbank. It was the Catholic girl's school. Villa Cabrini.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Villa Cabrini?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Because the building wasn't finished. And then it was a near disaster because of the earthquake, and the earthquake stopped right at the golf course right next to Cal Arts. The building wasn't harmed, and we were able to open then the next year. But. . . . I don't even know where to begin. I just remembered. . . . I think the first thing that comes to mind. . . . Well, let me start with the first day, let's say. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: That's a good place.

JOHN BALDESSARI: We drove up with Max Kozloff, who was on the first faculty, and we drove into the parking lot and we looked around, and I would say ninety percent of the plates were New York and New Jersey. And then you realize that this was going to be a sort of total import of New York culture in California.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Faculty or students or both?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I guess, you know. [probably means both—Trans.] And then we both laughed about it and said, "Well, here we go," you know. Well, I mean, what had happened, in fact,

was that the various teachers—I mean the various deans—were mostly out of New York and they got teachers that they knew, mostly from New York, and the teachers brought their graduate students, mostly, and so. . . . This was also a time when new schools were popping up, I don't know how many a year. And there was this band of nomad-like students and teachers that would go from one hip school to the next hip school. And I think what it was, that Cal Arts was the next hip school to migrate to. And so they all descended. [laughter] And there was just all this hype around, you know: Who's going to be the next Black Mountain College in alternative education, and, you know, blah, blah, blah. So there was a lot of underground word about it. And I think every crazy in the world descended the first year. There was just utter chaos. But out of chaos, quite often there's a lot of order going on. It's order that one should distrust usually.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Um hmm.

JOHN BALDESSARI: But you could. . . . In thinking again about the first year, you begin to see the handwriting on the wall what was going to happen, because there was a great deal of excitement for a moment, where it looked like [Herbert—Ed.] Marcuse was going to come up and join the faculty from UCSD. And he was willing. And the trustees said no. They didn't want all the bad, bad rep.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Bad _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And so you could see the beginning of the end, sort of right there.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: _____ trustees.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I mean, looking back. You couldn't have seen it then, of course. Another thing, rather, that was very hard for me to come to grips with is that coming from teaching situations that evaluated students with grades, all of a sudden you're in a situation where there's no grades. And it was always sort of a given, and you realize how much classes depend on grades as sort of like a punishment, you know. And here. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: _____ to keep people in line.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, exactly. And so. . . . There was no curriculum. One didn't assign, let's say, class problems or what have you, and there was no reason for a student to stay in your class if he or she didn't want to. Well, I mean, we know now. All of a sudden, a few contracts weren't renewed because nobody would go to the teacher's classes. "Well, I think the person's boring," or "Too much of an autocrat," or for whatever reasons, right, you know. And so that was unusual. And then there was a lot of money around that first year. Every class that—we were on a quarter system—every class got pin money of fifteen hundred dollars. It doesn't sound like a lot, but. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Again, that would go a long way.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, yeah. This is per class, you see, for incidentals.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Incidentals.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Plus there was a fifty-thousand-dollar-a-year fund, student administrated, to give grants to students for projects that might take unusual expense. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Wow.

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . that they could make, put in application for. The equipment we had was

unbelievable. I remember porta-packs—you know, portable video cameras—that's what they called [them] at the time. Which are pretty unusual, period. You know, we had twenty-five of them. And students could check them out. And the equipment policy was so lax, there was incredible rip-off. There was just no monitoring of. . . . Allen Kaprow actually. . . . In the shop, he noticed this guy was just building this giant box, and you didn't pay much attention to it. And each day he walked by, and then one day he sort of looked in, and this guy was filling it full of equipment he was just going to mail back to where he came from. [laughter] And so there's a lot of loss that way, but in a way the best reading of that you can be, it's like if a book is stolen from a library, it's great, you know, it's being put to use. And it was supposed to be cross-disciplinary, but the architecture of the school just really inhibits that, because it's all corridors and doors and so on. Inasmuch as it was encouraged, I don't think it was ever that successful. I think it's a little scary for students to try to [collapse] into another school. Although there seemed to be sort of tradeoffs going on. Like if a student wanted to learn something in the film school, he would hang out over there—or she—and begin to trade things. Like the student might do some sets, whatever, and the tradeoff would be that you would get to use a camera and _____ crew or something like that, _____ a film, those sorts of things, tradeoffs going on. Another good thing was that the place was open around the clock, so you didn't have to turn on creativity at eight o'clock in the morning and stop at five. We were very relaxed about living in the studio and sort of winked at it, so students that had very little money could just live and work in the same space. See we had studio space for everyone, and every graduate student had a scholarship, pretty much.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: About how many art students were in it?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I think roughly about, oh, maybe a hundred to a hundred and thirty were tops. Of those maybe thirty, thirty-five would be graduate students. There was no curriculum, as I had mentioned, and I even suggested—and we tried it for one year—that students could propose any course that they thought would be necessary, and we would find an instructor for it. That met with moderate success, and I guess students were still authoritatively bound. [laughs] Feeling that adults knew best. And we had some unusual courses. I think one of the most bizarre ones that comes to mind was a course on joint-rolling.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Joint-rolling?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, we actually had it listed.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: And we had another one taught by a sociologist who was of the Critical Studies faculty, that the class was in session anytime that he encountered a student on campus. So in other words no fixed time. Rather Socratic. [laughter] I don't know, what. . . ?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: How did the infamous Post Studio class. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, yeah, I had mentioned yesterday that I was hired as a painter, and was a bit frustrated. You know, I really didn't want to do that, and there were other painters, that, you know, they had been hired.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You hadn't been painting for five years at that point.

JOHN BALDESSARI: No. No. Yeah. But I guess they didn't know what else to call me. [laughs] And so I went to Paul [Brach?—Trans.] and I said, "Listen, this is really kind of silly and makes me

uncomfortable. Can I devise a class where, that's more in keeping with what things I'm thinking about?" And he said, "Sure, make me a proposal." And I thought about it and thought about it, and tried to bring some structure into it, and I thought about calling it conceptual art, but that seemed too narrow and too prescribed. And then I think I owe the phrase, the title "Post Studio," to Carl Andre. I know I didn't coin it. But it seemed to be more broadly inclusive, that it would just sort of indicate people not daubing away at canvases or chipping away at stone, that there might be some other kind of class situation. And so I elected to use that. And it seemed to work.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So how was the class organized?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Structured?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Basically, the way I ran. . . . [crash in the background, which is ignored by the interview participants] I tried to give them sort of a brief history of contemporary art and _____, and then trying to bring it up to these issues that developed me, so they could see that the things I was interested in didn't come out of the blue sky—that there was some continuity to it all. So liberal use of slides and a lot of use of overhead projectors instead of books. And since I was on the road a lot in Europe and New York and [in] _____ and then doing shows, I would bring back catalogs, magazines, and talk about the stuff I'd seen. And so the students had probably the quickest access to information of any art school in the U.S., I would wager. They didn't have to wait for it to come into the magazines. And plus the visiting artists. I would have at least one or two a week talking there. And field trips. But not necessarily art related, you know: going into the things that, introduce them to culture, let's say in the broadest sense. You know, like going to Forest Lawn, or the Hollywood Wax Museum, or what have you. And a lot of times just anything to get out of the studio. One of my tricks was just that we'd have a map up on the wall, and somebody would just throw a dart at the map, and we would go there that day. [laughter] They could take their _____ cameras and still cameras, and so whatever they wanted in just staying out there. Try to do art around where we were.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Was the availability of equipment at Cal Arts influential in your own work?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yes, of course. Because like, I mean, this is one of the reasons students and teachers align themselves with an institution where they have access, right? Yeah, sure, so I had access to video equipment, film equipment, and so on, sure.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And you hadn't done any of that before Cal Arts? Video especially.

JOHN BALDESSARI: No video. I started video there, yeah. And film.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What colleagues on the faculty—either permanent faculty or guest/visiting faculty—were of particular import to you?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I literally, by that time, I sort of was the sort of Cupid between the art world and Cal Arts. Or the pimp. Or whatever you call it. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Cupid or pimp.

JOHN BALDESSARI: You know, so everybody I met that seemed interesting I invited to come out in any way they could, and trying, would not sort of take no for an answer. If they'd say "Well, I can only come out for a day," I'd say, "Come for a day." But if they didn't have enough money, I would arrange

other gigs around town for them, with other colleagues or what have you. I guess the most reticent one was Sol Lewitt. He said no, he didn't want to go to any teaching institution. And I said, "Well, how about we could meet in a local bar?" He said, "Oh, that would be fine." So we just sort of hang out in the local bar all day and talk to him, drank beer. But I mean, that was the whole mistake I could [see, say] schools were making, you know, one, if they even thought about artists, they would have to be there on their terms.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, right. Five, six hours.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I always, I just figured the important thing was to get the artist at all costs. I mean, any that you could manage or any way you could do it. So I mean I would pick them up at the airport; I would find places for them to stay. You know, anything. Yeah, I was a pimp, if you think about it. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And who among students that you had were—if there were any—who were important to your work?

JOHN BALDESSARI: To my work?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah.

JOHN BALDESSARI: That's probably hard to. . . . There was a certain group of artists that we. . . . And then a lot of them sort of moved down here, where I was living, which was also good. And then also I encouraged them to get places where they could have studios as well, so that began to happen. And then when that began to happen, I began to schedule classes, and at first each week a different studio, so we could meet and see the work that was going on and what have you. And then, there was this tradeoff I told you of people working on various people's work. So I would help on students work when they needed help and vice versa, and. . . . Oh, and the other important thing, too, is an attitude I tried to develop, was that you were an artist when you walked in the door. Not a. . . . Wed' sort of break down this relationship of student and teacher, in that we just had more years on them, that was all, but we fully accepted them as an artist, and that helped a lot too. So, the teaching didn't stop with, when the end, when the day was over, class was over, or what have you. I mean students either would be visiting me or I would be visiting them. You know, drinking parties, what have you. So, God, I know, like. . . . Well David Salle, for one, moved right down here. And Jim Welling and Matt Mullican immediately come to mind.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Is there any specific relationship or types of relationships that you see between your work as a teacher and your work as an artist?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I should preface what I'm saying that we were I remember Max Kozloff once said to me that "If anybody that goes to an artist to find out about an artist's work is a damn fool." [laughter] You know, I've always thought about that. You know, and at a certain point, you know, artists do have blinders on of course.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yes.

[Tape 3, side B]

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . was, for this reason. The reason I got into teaching was that it was the closest thing I could be doing making a living, to art. Albeit it wasn't art. I mean, you know, I wasn't actually teaching. And then I just, I decided, "Well listen, it looks like I'm going to be doing this most of my life, and I'm going to have fun doing it," and so I decided to make it as much like art as I could,

given the parameters of the teaching situation. And so I finally think it came to a point like that, that one will loop back on through the other, that my art would be sort of an example or illustrative or a metaphor, for what things I was dealing with in class. And I was going at my class much like I would do art, which was basically trying to be as [formed] as possible, but open to chance. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You know, I think specifically of. . . I don't know if I have the right name of the tape, but the Teaching a Plant the Alphabet. Is that what it's called?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: The first time I saw that tape it was. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: The stupidest idea in the world.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: It was a long time ago. No, but the first I thought was, "I wonder which of his students was the plant?" [laughter]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, that's another tape called Teaching a Vegetable the Alphabet. [laughter] No. Well, the whole idea. . . We [encountered] Cal Arts so that. . . You know, what do you do in an art school? And you say, "Well, what courses are necessary to teach?" is question begging in a way, because you can say, "Well, can art be taught at all?" you know, and I prefer to say, "No, it can't. It can't be taught." You can set up a situation where art might happen, but I think that's the closest. And then I can jump from there into saying, "Well, if art can't be taught, maybe it would be a good idea to have people that call themselves artists around. And something, some chemistry, might happen." And then the third thing would be that to be as non-tradition bound, or dealing with _____ raw teaching as possible, and just be very pragmatic, whatever works. You know, and if one thing doesn't work, try another thing. I mean, my idea was always you haven't taught until you see the light in their eyes. I mean, whatever. Extend your hand, whenever you. . . . You make a point, you know. That's what you do. Otherwise, you're like the missionaries, delivering the gospel and leaving. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Trading it to the _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: In, let's see, 1971, was when you had your first shows in Europe.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, one other point, Chris, but I guess that was covered in having artists there, that would be very. . . And this I don't think is any axiom, but I think you've got to have an artist, practicing artist, teaching art. But, you know, there have been plenty of exceptions where there have been really good art teachers who don't do art, so I can't say that's it any universal.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Have there?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I thought of this guy, Herb Jepson, at Otis; he was really inspirational to a lot of artists—and to me. I mean, he was limited, but I didn't know he was limited until later. I mean, it was enough for me at the time. I suppose if he had more to give, I could have absorbed more, but there was. . . I found him very inspiring, I've got to say. But you think of the countless art departments where that notion isn't really used at all. They're academics first, and then they're artists. And so I think you teach. . . . Students learn by watching a model or doing art, and then they can see that you're having the same trouble that they're having, that they're not being stupid. You know, that you work and work and work, and now and then some art comes out. And that artists

are human and fallible, and so on, and then it becomes something that students can aspire to, and say, "Well," you know, "I can do that." But otherwise, it's pretty. . . . You know, you get this idea that artists are made in heaven or something like that.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Was being in Valencia sort of—I mean a rather isolated situation. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: I think that was the one big mistake they made, because I think students need to be in a city where they have access to the world of art. So that became very hermetic. Yeah, we had to make incredible. . . . I mean the amount of stuff that students could get there: a twenty-four hour film program, music going on of all shapes and forms, theatre. I mean, there's no way one could partake of all of it. But still, you're in this box, and outside of the box, there's not much. And so, you know, we had two full-time psychologists, people flipping out all the time.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Really?!

JOHN BALDESSARI: Couldn't take it, yeah. I think that was a mistake. But I think that. . . . You now, it's a Disney idea. You go to some godforsaken place and then let the real estate grow around you. [laughter]. That's what happened. Not a good idea. I think like Chicago Art Institute is ideal. Especially where you're back to back with a museum. Or Minneapolis College of Art and Design, where you're back to back and in the city. And you need cheap restaurants and cheap housing, cheap food.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Well, what is it about the urban milieu that's necessary for the school?

JOHN BALDESSARI: That's what I say. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Aside from. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, that?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I mean, psychically speaking?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, psychically, you [can] become part of some fabric of life and not in a laboratory.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Okay, in 1971 is when you had your first show in Europe, in Amsterdam.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yes. [Art in Project, Art in Project].

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Art in Project called Conception.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Um hmm.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Can you talk about that show a bit?

JOHN BALDESSARI: There was a series of eight-by-ten, black-and-white photographs in a ring binder open on a table. And. . . . [pauses] I'm trying to think. . . . They were all photographs. . . . There was a caption I had torn out of a newspaper. Jesus. I can look it up for you. Art. . . . I'll have to look it up for you. Anyway, and so this torn out fragment of newspaper was placed upon some usually flat visual material and. . . . Oh, yeah, it said "Art Disaster."

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Art disaster?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And I don't know what the hell it was referring to but I just, I loved the idea about it. And I had just torn it out of a newspaper, and I had it around for a long time. And then I'd collected, over a period of time, examples of art—directions in art, whatever you might call it—I didn't think were very profitable to follow. [laughs] We're back [to, with] the Venice art scene again. And I just dropped that on each example, and then I rephotographed it. And it was just a series of these photographs. And I don't know if anybody every got it at all. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So it said "Art Disaster" over a picture?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Yeah, of something illustrating the tendency in art that I thought was a dead end. But it wasn't an example of that kind of art; it was something that would conjure that up. I mean, what can I give you as an example? Oh, there might be a very, let's say, drawing from a textbook—I would save a lot of drawings when I was teaching high school or junior high school—but let's say just the very ruler and pencil drawing, isometric drawing [of, or] something. And that could be referred to, minimal art, let's say, like that.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So it wasn't a feature of. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: [So, it was] something dealing with pure language or what have you. It would be illustrative, or conjure up, possibly, if you were knowledgeable about art.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And what other artists were in the show?

JOHN BALDESSARI: But it was very Ad Reinhardtish when I got through with it. There wasn't anything left that was worthwhile following. [laughter] You know, I sort of dismissed everything.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Scorched earth.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Dismissed everything. [laughing]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You didn't neglect anything.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Anyway, that was my first show.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What other artists were in the exhibition? And did you go to Amsterdam?

JOHN BALDESSARI: No, it was just a one-person show.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Oh, that was just one person.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Um hmm. And did you. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, yeah, and the announcement: it was great. It was just one of those old photographs from the forties or fifties, some guy in floor-to-ceiling library stacks. He's up on a ladder taking a book out of from the top stack, and then over that it said "Art Disaster."

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So that show was in 1970 or '71? I can go check it.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, probably then.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I did jot down that in 1972 you had nine exhibitions in Europe.

JOHN BALDESSARI: You're kidding.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Uh uh. Nine solo. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Jesus Christ. Nah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah. I counted. . . . It's in the retrospective by _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Jesus Christ. Well, I can explain that. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Do!

JOHN BALDESSARI: No. What it was, Chris. . . . And I mentioned Konrad Fischer and his first gallery, although he had moved into a space by the time I hit him, was in his apartment. And most of these guys were just all, you know, literally putting out a shingle, so to speak. Like, "I'll be an art dealer. Why not?" And they all sort of knew of each other. So you showed with one, you showed with 'em all. You know, it was just the whole circuit one followed.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, it said, Belgium, London, Bonn, Paris. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yes. I didn't realize there was that many.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: . . . Florence, Amsterdam, Dusseldorf, Brussels again, and Rome.

JOHN BALDESSARI: That's why I was so tired all the time. I really had never counted them.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Did you go to Europe for any of these shows?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Every one of them.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: For every one of them?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You were tired, my God.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Well, that was another time I almost got fired. I'd done a show in—two shows—and the last one, I don't know where it was, and then Paris. And then [Lucio, Luccio] [Malio, Maleo] from Modern Art Agency in Napoli, I thought that was to be my third show. But the way we had arranged it, he would just come and get the work in Paris and bring it back. And I had the announcement all layed out for him and everything. And he said, "No, no, you must come. You don't understand. I am art. I am contemporary art in Naples and it's a big deal. You know, a lot of people coming to the opening." And I said, "[Lucci], you don't understand. I've got a job and I've been away and I really have to be back." But we figured out I could get there for the opening, and catch a plane the next morning and get back to my desk. So, we went down and we did the show, and it's true. It's just like, there must have been a thousand people at the opening. And I caught a plane at sun[rise]. . . . The sun had not even arisen and we were going to the airport at three-thirty in the morning, and the sun was rising over Pompeii, and got a plane to, Jesus, to Rome, to Paris, New York, L.A., and was at my desk for enrollment the first day of school, nine o'clock in the morning, and I said, "You know, this is fucking crazy. I don't need this." And then I had to take off for another gig on the weekend, and I just got one of my graduate students to cover my classes, and Paul was really pissed. He said, "You've been away for two weeks and you leave again?" And he said, "You gotta

stop this.” I pushed it a little bit too hard that time. But that gives you an idea of my life.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah. In 1972, then, was really the first time you spent a lot of time in Europe. You’d been before, you said.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, but not. . . . That was the first sort of art, yeah. So the first time was all new to me.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So how would you characterize the art situation in Europe that you encountered in that year?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well. . . . [pauses] Well, the best thing about it was meeting artists that were interested in something similar that I was, or I had read about, or what have you. So amongst this group of artists, there was a lot of excitement, or maybe I made it exciting. I don’t know what, but. . . . And I think it was a very important time for many artists, because air fares were cheap, and then these dealers had the idea. . . . And I think, actually. . . . I don’t know if Konrad started it, but you bring the artist over, and you do the work there, rather than shipping art. And so what you ship is actually the artist. And that was incredibly valuable for me—and in turn valuable for Cal Arts—because I would bring back all, you know, full of excitement, conversations I had back to Cal Arts and pass it on and share all the information. So it was a heady time, and I think I’ve not experienced it since.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So the idea of shipping the artist instead of the art would, [can only] have been possible with conceptual art.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, and. . . . Well, I remember Seth Siegalaub when he was, he always made a joke was, “Yeah, when I have to ship a show, I just go down to the post office with it under my arm.” [laughs] So I mean, I think a lot of. . . . Well, Lucy Lippard’s term “dematerialization of art,” you know, really, it got—I can’t think of the word I’m using—but transferred. I mean, art became the artist so to speak. I mean, there was something being shipped.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah. It’s interesting then that in the seventies. . . . I tend to think of the seventies in this country as sort of the decade of the local artist. I mean, the whole regionalist, you know, this kind of attempt to make, to construct a regionalist aesthetic and. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, and then I would get back into L.A., and, you know, you could understand my getting conflicted, because I had no feeling for anything going on at all, but enough of a developing ego where I could believe in myself more and more. I think that was certainly bolstered by people that thought similarly so I didn’t feel so crazy anymore. And from strength in numbers yeah, it got easy. But I would remember never—or very seldom—getting invited to all the big art parties, and I remember. . . . Who was it? The big party-givers were the Grinsteins and the Butlers. It was where they both had big houses and a lot of money and a lot of drugs and. . . . [laughs] But like people I would know that would be art stars visiting from New York, they would come back. . . . I remember one of them—was it Larry Wiener or somebody?—and he was laughing and said, “They don’t even know what you do.” Oh, yeah, and I remember one time I picked up Daniel Buren at the airport and. . . . You see, every artist that. . . . You know, nobody had any money, so everybody stayed at our house. . . . Not my sister. My daughter says she got the greatest art education, that she met every contemporary artist when she was a child. And anyway I picked up Buren, and he’d already been out here once before, and so we were having lunch at my house, and I’m on the phone with somebody and actually getting one of those call interruptions—you know, the emergency phone call you got. “What can this be?” It’s Elyse Grinstein. And she says “Is Daniel Buren there?” and I said, “Yes.” And she said, “Well, you bring him over here right now.” It was an order. She

thought I had abducted him or something. “And why would anybody like that want to have anything to do with me?” [laughs] So it was constantly like that. And I think it’s ironic now that I’m doing prints there but. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: That’s [right].

JOHN BALDESSARI: Anyway but I got a sense of humor about it all. [siren passing by outside]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Sort of following along that line. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: And it really continued. . . . I mean, sorry [for interrupting], it really continued up until the time when I had my show at Margo [Leavin]. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: In 1984.

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . in ‘84. You know Margo said, “Listen, I don’t know how to market you.” I think she was mostly doing it because I think she was getting a big push from Alexis Smith and Lynda Benglis and Oldenburgs, and so on. She had so little faith in me, I’ve got to say, that I had to bring in my own photographer to photograph the show.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Really.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And she left town during the show and so on.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Well, I did. . . . I was also counting other things. Between 1960 and 1984, you had three shows in galleries in Los Angeles and twenty-six shows in galleries in Europe.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Jesus. I didn’t know I’d had. . . . I mean I knew how many shows I had in L.A. That’s not too hard to count. One, two. . . . [laughs] Yeah, the second one was Jim Corcoran, and I had a big argument with Illeana [Sonnabend]. I said, “He doesn’t want to show me.” And she said, “No, no, he really likes your work.” I said, “Illeana, now look, come on.” He says, “It’s a trade-out with Leo.” You know, because he had. . . . First show was [Bob.] Morris and then I think the Bechers and I was the third one. And then, “No, no, he really, really does like your work.” So I finally did it, and I’m still not convinced he liked my work. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And that was 1976.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, yeah. I mean, he was very nice and very gracious. I don’t think he knew at all what I was doing. Although I tend to veer a little bit in that direction because I am convinced he shows things he really does like—you know, because his space is so bizzare he must like it. You know, it’s not like he chose it in some canonical way.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: No.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Anyway.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And there are probably lots of reasons.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, true, true. But at the time, I mean, I was a little bit better, because I had an offer from Larry Gagosian also and Corcoran and Margo. And I guess Corcoran, I just seemed to be too flaky for him. I have no idea how _____. And Larry, he had the idea that art. . . . It was more about selling, and less about art, really. As long as he was selling something, art just happened to

be there. [laughs] And I had the idea that he could vanish in the middle of the night. And Margot, while less exciting, I had the feeling that she was committed to what she was doing. It's a little less exciting gallery now than it was. I thought she was doing pretty well at the time. But anyway, that was my reason for my choice.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: During this time, during the seventies and during the eighties—I mean, this does fit in with what you were just saying—what relative—or relevant rather—friendships, of artists or dealers and collectors or. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: From what? Seventies through eighties?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, from seventies. Particularly the seventies, let's say. I mean like Lawrence Wiener, for instance.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Lawrence became very good friend. Paula Cooper. Elan Wingate. And I think a lot of my social milieu, too, were. . . . You know, I said working with students. So they were really the people I ate and drank with and so on. And then I was on the road so much. It's not so much. . . . My social life is pretty much taken up with, one, doing my own art and people just coming through town. So you have dinner with this person, dinner with that person, so not too much time to. . . . But looking back in years, I think Marcia Tucker was another one. Geez, I don't know; I'm trying to think here. [Seth, Sep] Siegeloff, Lucy Lippard—they were a couple at the time. I'm sure there are others.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: How did your relationship with Illiana Sonnabend begin?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Um. . . . [laughs] This is a great story. I'm glad you asked me. I was in Cologne at a show called Prospect, which was a rather interesting show that I think Konrad Fischer was behind primarily, but the show, sort of new tendencies in art each year. No, I'm sorry. I got it confused. That was Project. Prospect was sort of a. . . . It was another one. This was put on in Cologne, and it was sort of anticipatory for one of the Documentas, I forget which one. I mean, pretty much the show was. . . . People who were in that show were going to be in Documenta, or so it seemed. And she. . . . I was in Konrad Fischer's booth at the Art Fair in Cologne—it was on at the same time—and she came up to me and introduced herself, and said, "Would you consider showing with me?" And I thought she meant Paris. And I guess I was just so kind of exhausted, I said, "Well, you know, I'm really, I don't know if I'm able to talk about it now, but. . . ." And she said, "Well, will you be through to New York?" I said, "Yes. That'll be my next stop." She said, "Well, can we have a meeting and talk about it there?" And I said, "Yeah. I'll do that." And by that. . . . I didn't have any representation in New York also, since Feigen had closed down, and so I really thought, "Well, in Paris and France that could be okay." I mean, I was covered in other cities, so to speak. So I got there and every. . . . Michael Sonnabend was there, Illiana, Antonio [Homem—Ed.]. Elan Wingate had just joined the gallery. And that's when they had their gallery uptown. They hadn't opened it downtown; they were across from the Whitney. And God knows who; everyone was there. It was kind of a shock. I had thought it was just going to be Illiana and myself. And so I remember them asking me where I was showing. They asked me where I was showing in Europe, what galleries I was in, and I named them off. And Michael was acerbically saying, "Well, where do you show in Iceland?" [laughter] Well, what it was was they wanted the whole enchilada, so to speak. You know, that it couldn't be just New York or Paris, like that. They wanted to be my primary gallery. So that was a big [cincher] to me, and I said, "Well, I have commitments to do shows with these other galleries, and you'll have to honor them. And then I guess I had the sort of naive idea that things would work out, which they did [for, with one of] the other galleries. [laughs] Because I said, "Well, can we work cooperatively with Sonnabend, and it was like, "You've got to be kidding." Because, you know, she had an incredible reputation at the time as being this really tough woman and the most powerful dealer in Europe,

and so they wanted nothing to do with her. It was about power, you know, and they were not going to. . . . You know, "You either, you have to make up your mind. You show with us or her, but you can't do both." So I lost Art in Project. I lost Konrad. I pretty much lost 'em all, I think. I really did. And. . .

[Tape 4, side A]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: . . . an interview with John Baldessari on April 5, 1992, at Baldessari Studio in Santa Monica. The interviewer is Christopher Knight and this is cassette number four.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, I was naive enough to think that some sort of alliance or compromise had or could have been worked out, and they weren't. And so I lost. . . . Well, I mean [MTL, Empty E] Gallery in Brussels that—I mean, he was in a bad car accident, so that was automatically out of the picture. And Art in Project refused to do it. Konrad, I continued with for a little bit. I don't know where else. [Joselli, Guselli] Gallery, I stopped with him because I found out he was selling my work under the table, and so I just cut off relationships with him. And it was about. . . . Yeah. And I think the reason I did it [moved without thinking to the new gallery—Ed.] was I'm just not a good business person, and the idea of dealing with all the logistics of different galleries, I just didn't have the head for it. So, well, it seems like it's better to have works at one gallery, and they can do all of the logistical stuff, and I just want to do the art, and [which I have] continued to present. And I have lost shows for various reasons over the years because, one, she's so powerful they don't want to accede to her, or the percentages allowed are so little that they're just not profitable for the galleries _____. But I think in all it's been okay.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Well, it doesn't seem to have slowed down the number of shows that you were doing.

JOHN BALDESSARI: No, but there are shows that I could have done, or that I would have liked to have done. I mean, I'm very sad that I have not been able to continue my relationship with Konrad. And actually I thought about a year ago we had worked something out, and he said, "It's okay. Let's just do it and I'll work through her." And then, I don't know, something happened. And he said, "No, I just can't do it." I've always liked Konrad as a friend as well so. . . . And Art in Projects, I don't know if I regret that so much. I mean, they're very good I think but then they've become a very fancy gallery also, too, and so. . . . And in London, I was showing there with Jack Wendler who ran *Art Bulletin* and Lisson, the gallery I show with now. And he had asked me, actually, a day after Jack, and I said, "I can't do it," but then after I left Jack I, after some hiatus, I joined Lisson Gallery, and that's worked out okay. And in Paris, I just recently switched galleries there. I'm with [Chantal Couselle]. I just did the first show _____ this year. And so I'm gradually sort of. . . . And then Brooke Alexander and John Weber and [Public Tobey] have their gallery in Madrid, which I've been showing at, and I have another Gallery in Brussels now. So I've sort of built it back up again.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Have any of the dealers that you've worked with, or been friendly with, been important in other than a business sense or a management sense? I mean people you've talked to about work.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, you know, I've usually had this attitude about dealers. That if I can't enjoy going out to dinner with them, I really don't want them as a dealer—I mean, as opposed to this idea that a good dealer is somebody who sells your work. Because a lot of dealers for years didn't sell anything, and that they would do it repeatedly and not make any money! They're either crazy or we have a good relationship. Like Peter [Packkesh, Pakesh], he's been a. . . . That's another big gallery I have. I don't think he's sold but one or two works over our relationship, and he continues to [do

showings, be showing]. And very supportive in arranging this and arranging that for me, and so on. Yeah, so that's been very important with me. And actually the reason I think for dropping the gallery I had in Paris, [Larish, Larsj] Sullivan. Because while [they, he] had a lot of money and everything, it just didn't seem the gallery for me. It was something Illiana had arranged. It just didn't feel comfortable, and I left. I ended up going to a gallery where I felt more sympathy with the person. Yeah, so that's been very crucial. And dealers. . . . You know, I mentioned Elan Wingate. He went to have his own gallery, and [we're living at the ocean], and we're very. . . . You know, we talked quite regularly on the phone and still very good friends. Brooke Alexander has become a good friend. Marian Goodman. And I continue to work with them now as well in New York. Paula Cooper, I've never shown there but she's always been a good friend and very supportive of me, and has arranged sales, bought work herself, and she's having various group shows and things.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: The retrospective last year—or two years ago, 1990—a number of artists say. . . . This may even be somewhat of a cliché, but a number of artists say that doing a retrospective is a rather terrifying thing. Ed Ruscha being sort of the classic example. . . . I don't want no retrospective [the title of a Ruscha drawing—Ed.]. What kind of impact did that show have on you? Doing that exhibition?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, it's good that you bring it up, because I'm just beginning to think about it now. And I kind of pre-date it actually to when I took my departure from Cal Arts, where I had gotten the Guggenheim after many, many, many years. I don't know if I ever told you that story.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: No. What?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I had applied for years and never gotten it—not that I should have but. . . . But I religiously would apply, and I got so paranoid one time, I accused them of never opening the stuff I had sent them. [laughter] I swear to God that _____ still I believe it _____. So then I stopped for several years, but I would always write recommendations for people, you know, with the proviso, I said, "Listen, I've never got one. I'd be glad to write one for you." And then one year, I was writing them out again, and I thought, "Well, why don't I try it again." So I applied, and after some months a letter came, and I didn't even open it. I said, "Well, rejected again." I was just so conditioned to rejection from them. And then at Cal Arts, I ran into Bob Fitzpatrick, and he said, "Congratulations." I said, "For what?" And he said, "Well, you got a Guggenheim." And I said, "No, I didn't." And he said, "Yes, I got an announcement of it." And he looked at me like I was being disingenuous. And I said, "Are you sure?" And he said, "Yes," still looking at me rather strangely. So I went home and opened the letter and yeah. So, then I immediately made my resignation and said I was. . . . [Chancellor] Laurentino said, "Well, this is rather short notice. Won't you finish out the academic year?" And I said, "No. I'm leaving. I'm outta here." [laughs] And I guess what I'm saying. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: This was after twenty years?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, God, yeah, yeah. The reason I brought it up, it seems like it's been like this sort of, like in a jet plane since I walked out the door, and I've just now landed. So it started. . . . I mean, that gave me the time to work and the time to work generated more exhibitions, so it sort of went like that. And now I'm beginning to think about it all. Because it's like another chapter closed. Yeah, I think it's [like, right], again, you know, just always out of breath. Putting in incredible hours, getting up before dawn to work, and working late at night, and terrible traveling schedules, and, you know, just non-stop. And it just. . . . I think that's one of the reasons why, when this India thing came up, I said that's perfect timing. The last stop will be over, and let's go there. Of course, I couldn't stop. I kept working; every day the same schedule. But at least I got out of the, you know, a different culture where I could begin to think a little bit. And I guess I'm into that now. I have to. . . . It's sort of

like, you know, having, you know, I'll have to, you know, chapter two what else, what else, you know, where you reinvent yourself. Whatever it takes. I don't know, you know.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Did seeing twenty some odd years worth of work together change the way you saw your. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I'm sure it must. I'm sure it must, because one of the. . . . At the time, you know, I loved Coosje [curator of the retrospective—Ed.] a lot, but she's so anal and so fastidious. I would be on the phone four or five times a day with her, and an average phone call would be half an hour to an hour. She's such a fact checker. And so I'm glad it happened. My life is documented. [chuckles] And that was something I had let sli. . . . Well, I started to say let slide. It was a knowledgeable decision. Every time I had a prospect of a catalog, I said, "Can I use the budget to do an artist's book?" And so I really didn't have that many catalogs, you see. And anytime anybody would want to see the documentation, I'd have to go through my not-very-well-organized slides, or whatever. I could really see the value of something like that, so I did give it a lot of time. And I'm glad it was not a museum job because they can't give that much time and effort. She worked four years on it, and so everything is checked and cross checked for accuracy. And so it was worth it. But about the value of seeing all my work together, yeah. I was reading about Motherwell that he had once rented out a huge loft with the express purpose of just putting up all his work around to look at it for a few months. And in fact that's what a retrospective does. You have a big space where you can put your work up and look at it. [chuckles] And you can see certain things, you know, working, that grow certain dead ends, stupid mistakes, things that you could push further, and so on. Yeah, so that's the big payoff.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Were there any real surprises, in doing it?

JOHN BALDESSARI: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. No, but just the surprise of just seeing the arc of your life, you know, and like that. And that's frightening, but rewarding also. I could have never gotten that picture just going through my slide tray, or whatever. [laughter] And also having to evaluate work for inclusion in the show. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah.

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . and saying this goes out or this goes in or what have you. You know, those are tough and hard decisions. And you have to really think about _____ pieces. Who goes in the lifeboat, who doesn't, I suppose. [laughter]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: The selection of the retrospective seemed coherent until the mid 1980s. It seemed almost coincident with the market. You know what I mean? To have been selected in a really coherent way just until the point in the mid eighties when the market exploded, and then one of the considerations that seemed to enter the retrospective was who owned the work.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Um hmm.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I mean, this was the perception I had. Is that. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: That was a constant fight of mine and Coosje's. And again, a bit schizoid of me I suppose, because I had Mary Jane [Jacob—Ed.] and Coosje, both at first, and so there was incredible pressure from the [museum] to have works in, you know, people that they are courting, and the boards of trustees and so on. And a source of constant friction, yeah. Also, I think a lot of the, I mean a lot of the. . . . It shows a record of my non-sales up until then. [laughter]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: It did, really.

JOHN BALDESSARI: This is the reason I taught. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: In. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: But it meant. . . . I mean. . . . I'm sorry [for interrupting—Ed.], but. . . . Yeah, and that's a good point about the mechanics of the museum. Everything's not truth and beauty, and there's a lot of pressure to do things you don't want to do.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah. And it's a mistake to pretend otherwise.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And you realize. . . . I mean, in my darkest moments, it becomes very clear that the artist is expendable. I mean, if not you, somebody else. These things are going to go on. And, you know, that you actually hear Mary Jane on the phone or Koshalek, you know, "You take my show, because I took your show," or "I'll give you this show, you'll take that show." I mean, these constant trade-offs and to pretend otherwise is naive.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yes.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, yeah. And this is stuff that students should know, you know. And I try to, I've always tried to. . . . I mean, I didn't have that experience when I was teaching at Cal Arts, but I do try to pass on all that kind of stuff when I can. So it's not about some all-knowing beneficent God up there that makes the decisions. [laughs] [some loud crunching noises here]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: A couple of things that I'm just curious as to how you think about them in terms of art and your work. Humor, for instance. Humor has been a really important element of at least the post-cremation work. I don't know if that's a. . . . I don't know whether you're making fun of ab-ex [Abstract Expressionist—Ed.] paintings or not.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I've always sort of looked at it as I don't work intentionally for humor. Like, let's say, I think like Bill Wegman would do—that I think what the humor that's there comes from seeing the world awry or slightly off kilter, or it's balancing on one foot, or what have you. Trying to see the world anew, with fresh eyes, or what have you, non-conventional eyes. And pretty much the same technique I would use in teaching—trying to challenge everything conventional that was [handed]. I mean, actually, I taught a course at Hunter [College] one summer, where I just. . . . I began the course by having the students list all the things they were told, or they assumed to be sort of rules in art. And then we just examined every one of them. But I think it's that. [pauses] And I guess my mind is such that it sees connections everywhere, or sees a subtext to everything, or what have you. And I think a lot of that comes out in a way as humor. But it's nothing I intend. I think what I intend, as corny as it may sound, is something what perhaps like a good writer, good poet, intends. They're trying to get a relationship between two words that's not far-fetched, but not too flabby either, but just the right kind of tension where some new meaning is evoked or created. And quite often things can sound kind of, can sound humorous when that happens. [chuckles] Sure.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Another one. Art historical [references].

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I. . . . Maybe I'm the worst one to ask on that one. I mean the first time I even thought about that was actually, was Alex Smith, who said, "You know, I can look at your work and I can see the whole history of art in it." And I thought about it for a long time, and I said, "Well, I guess, maybe, as a result of that's my world—teaching art and knowing about art—and I guess that stuff's going to leak out, that's going to be a part of what I talk about, I suppose.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: But there are also. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: But I never thought about it before she said that.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Because there are, I mean, clearly conscious examples of. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: In the very early work, yeah, I think that, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Death, vanitas.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Oh yeah, like that, yeah. But see how I replied there. I said, “Oh, yeah, that.”

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Oh, yeah, that. [chuckling]

JOHN BALDESSARI: But that’s not art history. Yeah, but it is. Yeah, you’re right. See, I just assume this is stuff that’s just general knowledge.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And one thing that is probably from left field, but the coincidence between your retrospective and the Sigmar Polke retrospective. Has his work in any way been important to you?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I’ve known Sigmar since Documenta Five, I guess is where I first met him, and always loved him and appreciated him. I never saw so much work as when he was, you know, up until just recently. Yeah, sure, I knew of his work, obviously. Did it consciously influence me in any way? [pauses] Probably. I mean, not in any knowledgeable way. What I was going to say was something kind of bizarre, but maybe in some circuitous route. You know, being interested in some artist that was influenced by him, you know, something like that, maybe. I don’t know. I mean, I could imagine maybe Warhol being in some way, you know. You know, probably I learned. . . . I was going to say, I learned more from Warhol than from Polke, but it’s quite possible Warhol learned a lot from Polke, you see, also. I mean artists at its best level are in conversation with each other, and you’re commenting each other’s work, so. . . . Maybe I’m picking up from this person over there, or here, who knows. But he’s certainly always been an artist I respected highly.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Because when I saw his show I had never seen that much of his work all together either.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, it’s amazing how little has been known.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And one of the first things I saw—and I’m sure it’s because I’d been thinking about your work—was not his possible influence on you, but vice versa, from the photoemulsion things. Because I can’t think of another. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Again, I don’t know.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: . . . think of another painter who’s used that sort of photo _____.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, I don’t know. I know that, of all the artists I met—and a lot of them I met around the Documenta Five—I always enjoyed talking to Sigmar, because he seemed to be as crazy as me. [laughter] You know, and the conversations I valued a lot. I mean, because his mind seemed like it was, “Anything is possible.” “You want to do it? Just do it.” And that sounds so hackneyed, but when you consider, like. . . . I always loved something Seth [Siegelegg] had said to

me. He said, “Artists are always talking about being free and everything,” he said, “the bank tellers are freer than artists.” [laughter] And you think about it, you know, artists are very anal and tight-ass. You know, “You can’t do that.” I remember when I first encountered that in New York, when I would say something and, “No, you can’t do that.” The reason they’re saying you can’t do it. It wouldn’t fit neatly in art history. I said, “Well, does that mean you shouldn’t do it?”

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: That’s probably the reason to do it.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. But I mean it’s that kind of thinking. And when you think, “Well, if anybody should be free, it should be artists.” But you find out they’re the most constrained. And he was great. I always loved him just for that.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Of artists since the sixties, you’ve mentioned Warhol, which seems clear. What other artists have there been who have been. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, strangely enough—you’ll probably maybe laugh at this one—Sol Lewitt.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Oh, ho ho ho. [fake laughter]

JOHN BALDESSARI: [chuckles at CK’s fake laughter]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Why?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, as a person and an artist. I mean, he seems to have. . . . I mean, really inspirational to me, you know, that [he has] no attitude at all, and just does what he does. And he seems to be so clear about what he does. Which I’ve always liked. He’s so egalitarian about what he does. I mean, he doesn’t worry about he’s getting too many prints out on the market or what have you. He just does whatever he. . . . “Fine, let there be too many prints.” [laughs] And he’s just always working. He’s always doing it. And certainly you like some things better than others, and certainly. . . . I think it’s. . . . There’s something I like about him totally. It’s not like certain works. I mean, he doesn’t certainly have the richness of, let’s say somebody like Polke, but I guess what I like about him, he has this total clarity about what he’s doing—whether you like it or not. And he’s not going to. . . . I guess he’s the obverse of Polke. There are not going to be any great surprises. But what I love is the sort of methodicalness. He explores every avenue of what he does. And then his incredible generosity to artists, and the whole list of people he’s helped out, and with no particular glamour. The second book I did, [Artist’s Book, artist’s book], I found out he had funded it. And I didn’t find out until years later.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: How? How did that. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, we were both showing at the Castelli Gallery, and I guess he heard I was doing [it], and wanted to do [it], or whatever, and he came up with the money rather than the gallery, to do it. He financed Conrad [Fisher??—Ed.] and Carl Andre both. He just leaves their, oh god, a lot of them, you know, sales with Conrad just so he’d have money to operate on. And a lot of things I will never know about, but. . . . I know, like Lizzie Borden, when she first started making films, [ran, rented] her out of what you call it, editing tables, steel _____

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I don’t know.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Anyway, they’re quite expensive to rent. And just as long as she wanted it. Bought [Bye]’s work—I mean, as we know, how [various artists, great his art is]. A lot of artists over the years, he’s loaned some money, and I think it’s just admirable, as a model of an artist. And he’s

not there, like in the press, at every party or whatever. I mean, he has a very quiet life. So in that way I guess he's been very influential upon me. I suppose probably the person, artist I talked to the most is Lawrence Wiener, I suppose, over the years.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And how was that significant?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I guess, we were always at. . . . I mean, we sort of emerged at the same time. And there's something in our personalities, I guess, whatever. You know, of all of the sort of early artists, conceptual artists, I probably talked to him the most. I mean, I used to be with Dan Graham artist or Bob [Berg, Berry, Perry] or what have you. Very little with Kosuth. But Mel Bochner, and so on. But I guess the most lasting has been Larry, which I think is really strange because he has a lot of personal characteristics of things I loathe. [laughs] But there's something about him that I. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Do you want to specify those?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, that he's backbiting. Always putting down people. And always exhaustively talking about "This show I did, that show, I did. . . ." People he's impressed or what have you. And it's just all this stuff I don't care about. Or his sexual conquests. But there's something about what he does. . . .

Tape 4, side B

JOHN BALDESSARI: . . . _____, and he's down, he's negative. There's always a cabal out to do him in, or what have you, and just all the things I despise. And I thought, "Well, why do I even talk to you?" But on the other hand, there's something kind about him, generous, and he's incredibly well-read, and learned, and that, I respond to. So, I guess, you don't change people. [chuckles]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Nuts. [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: _____.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [Alas.] I have a list.

JOHN BALDESSARI: [laughter] Yeah, "a list of people I will never have a Chinaman's chance in hell in changing." What next?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Any others? I mean any other artists. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh. [pauses]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: . . . or museum people or collectors who've been. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Collectors. I've only in the last two years decided that collectors, there could be some of them could be good people. [laughter] And they weren't ogres. That's a little new for me. I don't know. I don't have very many friends. I mean, I have a Rolodex full of acquaintances. But I guess, I think what it was happened, Chris, over the years, that I just come down to a few people that I consider are friends, and that's about it. Yeah, and I think pretty much, like if I go to New York, recently I hide out a lot. And people I will look up. . . . Well, Illiana, Antonio, Paula Cooper, Elan. . . . And then there'll be Brooke and Marion, so it's all. . . . Larry. Let's see, who else? That's about it. God, what a dull life. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: That's a pretty good list.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Now I'm depressed.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Well, we were just going to move into personal life and family, so. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, okay. All right.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You were married?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And separated. And the separation took a long time. I was living apart for a long time.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You were married when and. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: God, I'm sorry, _____ I'm bad on dates.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: That's why you're separated today; you don't remember that anniversary.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, yeah, I know. I don't even remember when I got married, and I don't remember when I got divorced. I could look up the specific date. At least I got. . . . I got married, I would say roughly. . . . That would have been when? [pauses, thinking] I suppose, around '65 in there, something like that. I could check. And separated I think about four years ago—I mean legally, but I'd been living apart much longer. And I have two children. A daughter who is twenty-eight? and a son who's twenty-five.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And what are their names and where do they live?

JOHN BALDESSARI: My daughter's name is Anna and my son's name is Tony. And my son is in his third art school: Cal Arts, Art Center, and Otis. And I think he's dropping out of Otis now. And my daughter had gone to Berkeley, as a Regent Scholar in math and physics—she was pretty bright—and got up to graduation, and decided she didn't want to go on with it. And then dropped out and worked, waitress, [art store], waitress, and then she came to Cal Arts for a while. Thought she might try that. Dropped out after a term, went back to Berkeley. And she went and she took some courses in art history. Now she's in an art school in the city, this thing I can't even think of. . . . Taking courses in graphic arts, photography, design, and thinks she might go into graphic arts. And my son is somewhere between graphic arts and fine arts.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And the last question is what is conceptual art?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Oh, God, Chris.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [fiendish laugh]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I think, now, you know, as we talk—I don't know if you'll agree—but I think it's a rather meaningless term. Something like, what is impressionism? Or what is expression, whatever. It made some sense at the time, but when you try to pin it down, you really can't. Or it could be like we all know what we mean when we talk about a painting or drawing, but then when you define it, you can't. I suppose I would continue to define it as those kinds of pursuits in art that aren't clearly definable as painting. Although, actually, there again, I get in a trap right away. There certainly is conceptual painting. And I guess. . . . You know, I'm backing myself into a corner. It could be that kind of art where one instinctively feels or surmises that it's more about some idea than it is

the making of it. Maybe that's the distinction. It's less about hands on and making, than it is about conveying some sort of idea or attitude or concept. Could that be it? I mean, I don't know.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [laughs]

JOHN BALDESSARI: For every definition I come up with, I can think of exceptions.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Well, what's been the principal significance or significances of the phenomenon of conceptualism? Because it is one of those things that has so infiltrated all kinds of art practice.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I see. Yeah. Well, to me, it would seem that its most enduring benefit has been breaking the stranglehold of what art is or could be. I mentioned yesterday that when I was a freshman in college, I didn't even know who Picasso or Matisse were, and when I graduated, that art could be anything other than traditional painting or traditional sculpture was uncomprehensible to me. And that's what art was. And I think that attitude, pretty much I got it all through school, even in Berkeley, that that's what art was. And only my own dissatisfaction or inquisitiveness or restlessness or boredom got me to push it further and begin to. . . . It's led me into [dye] art, and from there you can begin to make jumps and leaps, and that it doesn't have to be just daubing paint on a canvas.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Slopping paint on a canvas _____ should add to that. [chuckles]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Well, and. . . . Yeah, I know I would get for years, you know, I mean, that I would show up at some university, and they would say, "Oh, you're the guy who is anti-painting." And I'd always have to correct it and say, "No, I just believe that art could be more than painting."

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Well, yeah, in a certain way the parameters of painting have defined the direction of your work.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: It's like, "not that."

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. And I love, now, that we have the term neo-conceptualist about. And we sort of know what that means, but then you start to define it, and it doesn't mean anything, of course, but you take a plunge at it. And how the definitions have shifted, that I guess the widest umbrella seems to be the term sculpture. Everything fits under that. [laughter] There's nothing that isn't, right?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I mean, I remember the first time, just me encountering physically a painting as object, not as illusion—or at least in my own mind—was I guess when Stella made those big, thick stretcher bars. I remember asking him later—I don't know whether he was being disingenuous, to this day—about his ideas of making an object out of the painting, and he said, "No, no, no. I didn't have any idea like that at all. I just. . . . The stretcher bars just had to be strong. We just had to use wider material." Does he tell the truth? I don't know. I mean, Michael Fried and people made a whole lot of it, like this was all a conceptual plan. He denies it. I don't know. At least to me he did.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Well, I suppose it's one of those things where the way in which their work is received is as important as the intentionality behind it.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: In terms of where it leads.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, and how it's read. And I think a lot of art history evolves that way. You know, you think you're doing one thing, and a whole other thing comes out of it, yet you had no idea what was going to happen. I mean, you know, I'd be frank enough to admit that. You know, I've done works that I think are going to knock people on their ass, and just not even a yawn. And I'll just do something in an off-handed way and "Wow!" [laughs] Well, you know, who can tell? I guess one would be a millionaire if he figured those things out. Luckily it's not _____ good to try.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [pauses] I don't know how to phrase this, but maybe I'll phrase it. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: No, go ahead just. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: No, I'm trying to. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Sneak up behind it.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, it's a. . . . [pauses]

JOHN BALDESSARI: [pours water] You want more water?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, let me have a little, thanks. [pauses] Do you at all see the retrospective as in any way a kind of ritual that has any similarity to The Cremation.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, that's an interesting observation. Hadn't thought about it until now, but I think you may be on to something. Yeah, it's a summation of something. I thought it was great and somebody, maybe Ralph Rugoff, said I should do it again. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: [Fugg, Fuck]. [uproarious laughter]

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, but yeah, there is that sort of. . . . You know, I did say earlier, didn't I, like it's the closing of a chapter.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah.

JOHN BALDESSARI: And certainly of the. . . . Yeah, I think there's a distinct parallel there. You're right. You're right. In this way, it was sort of imposed from without in some way. I'm not saying I wasn't a willing collaborator, but I mean I didn't come up with the idea for a retrospective; somebody else did, in that sense. And it does tie something up in a package, so to speak. And in some ways suggests a period. I mean, a point where it may not have happened otherwise.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I suppose one of the big differences would be that what would be your relationship to that body of work, as opposed to the first cremation, your relation to that body of work was like disgust with it, in a certain way, whereas I doubt that you're disgusted by this body of work.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, it does, but it does wrap it up in some conceptual mode. I mean, I could go on, I guess, searching for parallels. Let's say, when I was cremating everything, I was sort of saying goodbye to it, and looking at things one last time. And there'd be that last image in my mind, so to speak, and with the retrospective, I'm seeing things in different venues, different spaces, and it's

almost like I'm saying goodbye, too. Because I'm not one to get out slides and look at them, you know, like fond memories. [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: "Memories, of the time we left behind. . . ."

JOHN BALDESSARI: And so there was a whole education for me, having to look up things and make decisions about things and evaluate things, and I found myself actually in some heated arguments with Mary Jane and Coosje, which I. . . . Normally, I think my attitude would be, "Well, this is work that I did, and I'm responsible for, so it really doesn't matter." But I actually did get into some pretty big arguments about pieces that they wanted to leave out for it seemed to me other than reasons. . . . You know, it would be like balance of the show, or size of the wall, or things like that. Or this collector wouldn't lend it, or blah, blah, blah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What do you think have been the most significant works that you've done?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I don't know about recently. It's hindsight. I mean, the more distance you have the more things fade in your memory. But two pieces had always seemed to me to be watershed works for myself—or pivotal or seminal or whatever. I think the first one was this one call. . . . There was the text-on-canvas one about a geranium, _____ geranium. And I think what did it, how that one turned a corner for me, was that the other ones were more cerebral, and this one became a little bit more poetic somehow, and more common, more ordinary, more banal. But in it being banal, you know, interesting. And that, somehow that did something for me. And the next one that did something for me was the one called Concerning Diachronic and Synchronic Time. And I think the reason that one holds some sway for me is that, one, that there's some sort of magical transformation occurring that I want to convince you of and myself of. And the other one is—and probably even more important—you know how you get that while something is happening here, something is also happening over there. And it's impossible to keep all those things in your mind, but one should try to do it. And I think that's maybe a reason that quite often my work looks, the parts look so disparate, but I'm trying to convince myself that while this is happening, this is also happening, and this is also happening, and they're related in my mind in some way, which I could describe, but I think drives sometimes other people a bit crazy.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I wrote down. . . . What did I write down? "Alienated fragments linked to the whole."

JOHN BALDESSARI: [laughs] Um hmm. Yeah, one could say that. yeah. And it's a little bit. . . . I think, you know, for a while. . . . And actually I did some pieces called "Space Between," or "Spaces Between," but I was actually, what brought them. . . . When I would just be talking, I would look between things rather than at things, just to get myself in the habit of not looking in the conventional way. Or I suppose I get to draw the strange expressions on my face, but I mean try to be simultan[eous], you know, like looking at one eye over there and looking at one eye over here, in some way, and trying to see them as a whole, rather than just looking at one thing, two eyes focused on one thing. But it's all in how we look at the world. I remember when I was teaching at U.C.S.D., like there was a. . . . We had these courses we always jokingly—or maybe I did—jokingly refer to as an "art dip." You know, you took the student in the philosophy department, and dipped them a little bit in art. Or whatever, you know. And I figured that most kids probably had a camera, probably didn't have art supplies. And rather than make them buy a lot of art supplies, I could probably do the same thing with a camera. And so one of the first exercises I would give would have them find a reproduction of the most maddening piece of art that they could find, that they thought would have the least to do with reality, and go out and try to find with their camera a counterpart

for it. And they almost all succeeded, and the lesson would be to them, it's just how you see the world. It's not about art not being real in any way. So if it were, let's say, a black Ad Reinhardt, of course it's pretty easy to photograph something black. But they can realize that that can't be interesting. They've never looked at an asphalt street before that long. [laughs] You know, something you don't look at. But it's no less interesting to an artist.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: So are you going to start painting now?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I don't know. I guess the next thing I'm going to do is see what I could do with all this stuff from India, what will come out of it. And I've been thinking a lot and reading a lot and thinking about what I want to do next. I mean, I don't want to replicate myself, that's for sure. So it's all about the unknown so to speak. So we'll see. I mean, I don't know. I think the thing that does help me a lot, I get bored kind of easily, and then so I just try to. . . . So I figure what bores me is going to bore other people. [chuckles] Or I just have a higher level of boredom. And which is fun because. . . . I mean, one of the games I used to play with myself down in my studio down in National City was just sit and look at stuff in my studio and ask myself, "Well, why could that be art, and why couldn't. . . ." You know, "how do I make art out of that." And obviously I had my own rules. And then I would ask myself, "Well, why do I say that can't be? What keeps me from letting that be somehow turned into art in some way?" And usually, we get, at least I get into a trap, and I suspect a lot of artists do, that things can be art, is that somehow that if they've appeared or figured or triggered art before it. You know, I can look at this stuff stacked up over here, these bits of cardboard, and I can say, "Yeah, that could be art," but the reason it could be art is because I've seen art look like that.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, sure.

JOHN BALDESSARI: And when I get to something, a place where I haven't seen art look like that, then my sensor comes in and says, "Well, I guess that can't be art." But that's exactly the point where you should begin to think about it, and [what goes on there].

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: I don't have any more questions, unless. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: Too much art history can be a dangerous thing. [laughter] Which, you know, you must encounter this all the time, that how little art history, a lot of artists have—I mean, what they've seen. I mean, the first time that hit me was when I was at Cal Arts and when Don Judd came out about these articles in *Artforum*. It was a series of four articles and. . . . God, that's been a long time. I don't know when those came out. Anyway, and I was lecturing, talking about them in this class, and I saw all these vacant looks. And all of a sudden I said, it hit me. I said, they didn't know who Don Judd was.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Oops.

JOHN BALDESSARI: You know, and I just assumed that they did because we're usually so good at apprising students of what's going on.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: What's the first work of art you remember seeing? I mean, when you were a coherent person who. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: That's question[able—Ed.]. . . . [laughs]

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: _____. You know, that made an impact on you, in the flesh. I don't mean in reproduction or something, but because it probably. . . . I doubt that it was at San Diego Fine Arts College. Maybe it was.

JOHN BALDESSARI: You mean the real thing?

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Yeah, the real thing.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Not a reproduction. Hmm. Yeah, that's a tough one because so much art, you know, when you see you're seeing first in reproduction. Oh, I know what, yeah. Actually, yeah. This is. . . . Yeah. Usually I'm pretty cerebral but I remember seeing Mondrian's Broadway Boogie Woogie and tears came in my eyes, I was so overwhelmed.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Really?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. I was so impressed.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: And what was it about. . . .

JOHN BALDESSARI: It just. . . . I don't. . . . God, I mean it just seemed so right. I mean, the way the paint was put down. And it's somehow like everything I wanted to do, everything I [thought, felt] right about art. You know, it's like sort of feeling this incredible feeling of validation, you know, with all the opposite I didn't feel about Venice art. You know, I said, "All this is getting incredible applause, so what's wrong with me? Am I sick? Am I strange? Or insensitive or whatever. And I saw that, and it just like knocked back on my heels.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: Have you ever been to the Arena Chapel?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Giotto, yeah. It was a long. . . . Yeah. But I finally saw that. Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: That's the only time tears have come to my eyes.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah. Well, I mean, tears came to my eyes when I saw a reproduction! [laughter] That's what I was saying, you know. I mean, yeah, that's, that. . . .

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: That just [scrubbed, grabbed] my mind.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, I think that. . . . Well, I had to teach art history once, and you know usually how you generally go from cave painting up to the Renaissance, Renaissance to the modern, you know, two semesters. So I started the second semester, and I think I spent two weeks on Giotto. I said, "Whoops." [laughs] Yeah, but then Giotto and Matisse are my two. I mean, for me it's just like all you need to know about art is right there. If I had to choose one over the other, I'd probably take Giotto, but a lot of incredible things Matisse does with color just amazes me.

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT: You must be looking forward to the. . . .

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *October 19, 2004*